Part I, "The Stirrup Boss" — a serial of the historic fight staged for a mighty brand, by PETER DAWSON

ANC

Short Stories

July

25¢

When oil first flowed in Pennsylvania

"A LAND WITHOUT LAW"

by Harry Botsford

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It happens to the nicest of Guys

ORDINARILY he was No. 1 on the hit parade as far as girls were concerned. But tonight he was getting the polite but cold shoulder over and over again. Something was wrong and he knew it . . . but he didn't know *what*.* It can happen to the nicest of guys.

The insidious thing about halitosis (unpleasant breath)* is that you, yourself, seldom realize when you have it. Moreover, it may be absent one day and present the next. And when it *is* present it stamps you as an objectionable person to be avoided.

Don't Take Chances

Why run this risk? Why offend others when Listerine Antiseptic is a delightful *extra-careful* precaution against unpleasant breath when not of systemic origin?

You simply rinse the mouth with Listerine Antiseptic and, lo! . . . your breath becomes fresher, cleaner, sweeter, less likely to offend . . . stays that way, too, for hours in most cases.

When you want to be at your best, never, never omit this *extra-careful* precaution against offending.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL COMPANY
St. Louis, Missouri

Before any date **LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC** the extra-careful precaution

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE DEPUTY received a letter which he sensed was asking him to commit yet another murder!

He realized deep in his heart it had all happened before — and that there was a note of it in. . . . .

DEPUTY COTTER'S SCRAPBOOK

by

Merle Constiner

FANS AND FANETTES AND interested onlookers all like *The Shooter's Corner*— watch for it in every issue, ramrodded by

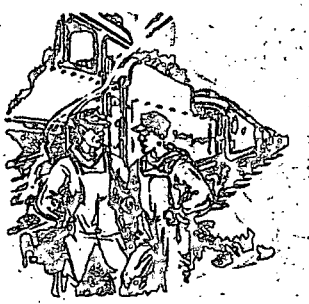
PETE KUHLHOFF

HIS NAME WAS Ernest Endeavor—and there you have it!

A COLT FOR THE CARLTON

by W. C. Gault

IT TAKES MORE than a set of rules and a pair of overalls to make a railroader, it does. . . . . .



"Eastbound Hotshot"

KEITH EDGAR

A NOVELETTE of that hell-hootingest town of all. . . .

"Gold Boils in Jezebel"

by

STEUART EMERY

All in the next issue of

SHORT STORIES

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Short Stories

THE BEST OF AMERICA'S ACTION ADVENTURE MYSTERY

THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE 4

A LAND WITHOUT LAW
(A Complete Novel) Harry Botsford 6
Pithole City, a Pennsylvania Oil Boom Town, Wild, Lawless. A Strange Place for Ben Mason, Late a Prisoner of the Confederate Army, a Man with a New England Conscience, to Find Himself Knee Deep in Oil and Conspiracy.

BERING SEA GHOST Robert E. Pinkerton 59
Scores of Sea Hunters Have Been Lost in Fog and Gale Up There in Bering Sea. Only Luck Got a Man Out. Terry Had Had It . . . . So Far!

NO MOTHER TO GUIDE HIM
Frank Richardson Pierce 59
This Open Country Was the End of the Line for Joe, the Bear Who'd Known Only Folks, Kids, Cages, and Peanuts

THE STIRRUP BOSS
(First Part of Four) Peter Dawson 66
Fred Vance Didn't Know How Much He Wanted to Fight for His Father's Old Stirrup Ranch Till He Came Back from New Mexico; No Matter Where a Man Wanders, the Ties of Early Years Are Strongest.

RIGHTFUL OWNER Merle Constiner 91
In the Days When the Lower Reaches of the Ohio Were Ravished by a Voracious Land and River Pirate, What Would Be the Use of a Young Lawyer from Such a Place as Philadelphia?

SHORT STORIES issued monthly by SHORT STORIES, INC., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City 20 N. Y., and reentered as second-class matter March 14, 1949, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE in the United States, American Possessions, Mexico, and South America, $2.50 per year; Canada, $3.25; and to all other countries, $3.30. Price payable in advance. July, 1949. Vol. CCVIII, No. 1. Whole Number 1939.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

EDITOR
D. McILWRAITH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
LAMONT BUCHANAN

July, 1949

CONTENTS

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER — Pete Kuhlhoff — 98

CURIOSITIES — Irwin J. Weill — 101

THE RAGGED EDGE — Philip Ketchum — 102
There Were Even Murders, the Girl Said Bitterly, That One Didn't Need to Be Ashamed of—Clean Murders. That Put Detective Ben Higgins Very Much on a Spot.

A GUNMAN'S GRATITUDE — Caddo Cameron — 110
It Was Hard for the Gunman to Get Lost in a Crowd, But There Were Times When He Sure Had to—And That Was When He Needed Friends. And He Was One Who Remembered His Friends Later on When They Needed Help.

TEXAS ZEPHYR (Verse) — S. Omar Barker — 119

THE BIGGER THEY COME — Ray Palmer Tracy — 120
Wireline Fuller, Morning-tower Driller, Let His Eyes Sweep Over the Easily Read Contours of the Surrounding Oil Country. "Holy Mackerel!" He said. "A Fault!" And Proceeded to Make the Most of His Knowledge.

THE BLINKER — Malcolm Murchie — 130
If a Man Gives His All To Baseball Through the Years, Then Surely the Diamond Game Owes Him Something More Than Memories.

COVER—Benton Clark

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

EVERY AUTHOR'S FINEST AND LATEST STORIES NO REPRINTS

Title registered in U. S. Patent Office. PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

The entire contents of this magazine is protected by copyright and must not be reprinted. Copyright, 1949, by SHORT STORIES, INC.

WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer*, M. DELANEY, *Secretary*.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Story Tellers' Circle

Trails of History

"A NUMBER of roads or trails have won fame and permanent places in popular American history, notably, The Chisholm, Santa Fe, Western, Overland, Goodnight-Loving, etc., and they're entitled to their honors." So says Caddo Cameron about his opus "A Gunman's Gratitude." He has an addition, though.

"There are, however, many others that played important roles in pushing back the frontier and today are unknown except to students of forgotten history. In this story I have used one of these—The Old Fort Towson Road.

"Back in 1820 the Governor of Arkansas Territory established a new county known as Old Miller County, which took in what is now a slice of Southwestern Arkansas and approximately all of what are now McCurtain, Choctaw and Pushmataha, and the south thirds of Le Flore and Latimer Counties in present Oklahoma. But Arkansas didn't get to hold onto this Oklahoma land. The U. S. Government ceded it to The Choctaw Nation in return for their holdings in Mississippi and white settlers and squatters were ordered to get out. In April, 1824, the War Department sent two companies of infantry to establish a post on Gates Creek about eight miles north of Red River and it was called Fort Towson. The army and civilians had some mighty lively times down there, but we won't go into that. It might be well to mention, though, that 'still-houses' operated by local citizens—including a Justice of the Peace and such—got so many soldiers tight they daggoned near ruined the army and it moved out a short while later.

"The old trail south from Fort Smith, Arkansas, through the mountains to Red River and into Texas was in use long before the birth of Fort Towson, but I don't know what it was called. Noted men and unknown travelers alike used the road—among others, Stephen F. Austin and Sam Houston of Texas fame.

"When Mister Gunman and his longhorse, Blue, kicked dust on this trail fifty or so years after the fort was established, it had become one of many 'thieves' runs' through The Nation over which stock stolen from the Indians was driven on its way to Kansas and Missouri, also to Fort Smith and Little Rock where ready markets were found. In 1872-73 outlaw gangs in The Choctaw Nation just about stole the country from the Indians. The Choctaws finally got riled and arrested forty men in one bunch, tried them legally in their tribal courts and sentenced fifteen of the outlaws to death. They were shot.

"Next time you want to go fishin', readers and Mister Editor, just take US 271 south out of Fort Smith, down through the Ouachita National Forest, over the Winding Stair and Kiamichi Mountains, stop at any of the beautiful streams and you'll get you a fish. You'll get woodticks and chiggers, too, if you don't know how to keep the things off. As you're a-ramblin' down the trail in your car you'll occasionally see some deep ruts beside the highway, and when you do you're looking at The Old Fort Towson Road."

—CADDO CAMERON

Rightful Owner Constiner

MERLE CONSTINER is one of our favorite people—both for the good stories he writes and for himself. Mr. Constiner is one of those authors who moves right into the story background but good when he does a yarn. And not only when it's about his own Ohio, which "Rightful Owner" is. We're old-fashioned enough to think that the fellows—like Constiner—who really lean on that research business end up eventually posting the highest scores in the story-writing trade. Herewith some

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

odds and ends by Merle Constiner about "Rightful Owner."

"Those were pretty touch-and-go times along the river here in Southern Ohio at the end of the eighteenth century. Cincinnati was the gateway to the wilderness then, and I mean wilderness. The greatest temptation in writing the story was in keeping Meason (or Mason) in the background, with his river and land marauders. Using them as an off-stage threat instead of bringing them into the narrative. This wasn't their story, really, and it was hard to resist. During the interval of the story Meason was living with his two sons at Cave-in-the-Rock, in the near neighborhood.

"His killing of Captain Dunn, near Henderson, Kentucky, in December, 1797, drove him out of sight. He next showed up along the Natchez Trace, robbing travellers. August 14, 1801, he robbed the Baker party in Hindus County, Mississippi. (And so on.)

"He joined Little Harpe (whom he knew under the name of Setton) in 1802. He was arrested by Spanish authorities January 11, 1803, turned over to American officials at Natchez, and shot the commander of the boat on the way upstream. In 1803 came his famous beheading by Little Harpe and May, for reward. And the recognition of Little Harpe and May and their subsequent execution.

"It's hard to put Meason in a story without making him a hogwild central character. For that was what he was born to be!"

—MERLE CONSTINER

Our Editor-Author

OUR writing associate editor, Lamont Buchanan, has "writ" again, we are pleased to remark. This one entitled "People and Politics" (Stephen-Paul Publishers, New York, $2.75) is an interesting text and picture history of American politics from George Washington's times through Truman's election last fall. This book is Mr. Buchanan's third in less than two years —Story Tellers' Circle regulars will recall his first two pictorial volumes on sports— and has already received some fine reviews from Coast to Coast plus a personal note of commendation from Bernard Baruch of which we are quite proud. We heartily commend "People and Politics" to your attention—politics being, after all, the most vital force affecting our lives and this treatment of the subject being both authoritative and entertaining.

Pitcher for Today—Dr. Sawbones

MALCOLM MURCHIE'S good baseball yarn "The Blinker" makes us think that the diamond season is full upon us. Now who is made happy by the annual arrival and following six months' excitement of the national game? Why, the baseball fan, of course, all forty or fifty million of him.

But there is another segment of the population whose pulse begins to beat faster, whose heart leaps with hope, and whose voice can be heard murmuring, "Maybe I *can* buy that new car, after all," as the crack of the bat echoes from the fields of spring across the nation.

We are thinking of the sawbones, the doctors. It used to be that to figure where a major or minor league team should finish in its pennant race, you'd tot up pitching records and batting percentages.

Then there were the purists who delved into ERAs (Earned run averages) and defensive figures. Following that it became popular to say, "Yes, but how deep is the club on the bench?"

Reserve strength had its heyday and the discussions revolved around not just the nine players on the field but the substitutes in the dugout and their relative merits.

All these factors are important still but the question of the hour in the baseball world today is "Who is the team doctor?" The MD has come into his own at last and often gets as much publicity as the star he treats. His bulletins on Ed Whatsis' aching elbow are greeted by press and nation alike with the attention of a D-Day announcement. For what he and his confreres do will have a vital bearing on stars, teams and pennants. Anyway, it'll cost plenty of jack. Just ask Joe DiMaggio or any club owner!

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A LAND WITHOUT LAW

By HARRY BOTSFORD

I

HIS restless, shabby, nondescript companions lined the rail of the *Gaxton Queen,* late of Memphis, one-time property of the Memphis Transportation Company, but now engaged in Federal business. The ancient craft splashed its erratic way up the Delaware River, but Ben Mason wasn't especially interested in reaching Philadelphia. He had withdrawn from the other prisoners, leaned moodily and aloof on the rail and roughly computed his individual hates. They were few but fervent. His gaunt face was twisted and his blue eyes

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A New Hampshire Yankee Finds Himself, Just After the Civil War, Among the Pioneers in the Raw and Lawless Oilfields of Pennsylvania

narrowed as he gave the matter sober thought.

The Civil War had ended a month before. He had been liberated about the same time from a dingy, unhealthy CSA prison camp at Gainesville by a detachment of Croxton's Brigade under the command of Major Wellington Asbury.

The fat little major, with the carefully tended brown beard, had been pretty nasty about it, too. Prisoners of war, he frequently reminded the shabby, half-starved men, had mostly been deserters. Certainly, they had earned no privileges and he had no intention of granting any. They had been drilled thoroughly and endlessly, fed frugally on

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ancient, maggot-infested hardtack and unspeakable salt beef. The major was only partially convinced that the men had become prisoners through no choice of their own. They had been unceremoniously herded on the ugly *Caxton Queen* to be taken to Philadelphia for final discharge. Their treatment, however, remained harsh, unfeeling, rigorous. The major was not a nice person. Obviously, Major Asbury was Mason's most important hate.

Three years of hard-riding service with Sheridan had made him detest the waste and destruction of human life and property incident to the successful pursuit of military victory. He had witnessed a lot of violence. In the future, it was his settled belief, he would resort to violence only under great provocation. Like Major Asbury, for example.

Above all, he hated filth and shabbiness. Essentially, he was a neat individual; he had the New Englander's natural penchant for tidiness and personal cleanliness. Just now, his clothes were a travesty; he had not been able to shave for a month. The razor the major had insisted be taken from him had been his sole and final asset. Normally a personable individual, his appearance was now that of a vagrant, a total stranger to soap and water.

His uniform had been hastily removed when Forrest's men had captured him in a brisk and bloody engagement at Selma. It was replaced with a torn, patched, wholly inadequate pair of cotton trousers, two sizes too short for his long legs. He had been given something that masqueraded as a shirt, a rag that had not known intimate contact with soap and water for months. His boots, the beautifully oiled and polished cavalry boots in which he had taken such pride, had caused an active and furious fight between two of his ragged captors. The winner donned the cherished boots, whooped joyfully at their fit. Mason was forced to wear the victor's discarded boots through sheer necessity. They were heavy cow-hides; one lacked a heel and the soles were mere holes held together by worn and fragile sections of leather. The jubilant victor courteously reminded him that the boots possessed one great sanitary advantage. They were, he explained at length, adequately ventilated, an obvious understatement. Mason still wore these ghosts of boots and he shuddered every time he glanced down and saw seven of his toes protruding. He also lacked socks, as did the other prisoners, all of whom were clothed as indifferently as he was.

HE hated the thought of returning to the New Hampshire farm house of his parents, the tidy white house that snuggled comfortably against the gentle swell of a hill covered with apple trees. He couldn't return home in this condition: dirty, penniless, shabby. It was a right long walk from Philadelphia to Minister's Corner, New Hampshire. The government, the fat and fussy major had stuffily informed the prisoners, had no intention of providing transportation beyond Philadelphia. Mason and his fellow-prisoners recognized this statement as a direct lie, and suspected that Major Asbury proposed to pocket all back pay and transportation money due the sixty-odd prisoners. The trouble was, it wasn't a thing that could be proven. Most of the men were so anxious to be discharged that they were willing to make any sacrifice that would not delay that very happy event.

Major Asbury, neatly encased in a freshly pressed uniform, bright in gilt and brass, stood importantly on the cluttered and dirty bridge of the little steamer. Under one arm he carried the discharge papers of the prisoners. In his free hand he held the breast of a roast chicken from which he nibbled daintily from time to time. The half-starved men watched each deliberate bite hungrily. Mason swore under his breath and there was a grim look in his young eyes.

The *Caxton Queen's* whistle emitted a sound curiously like an amorous drake; the engine reversed and the paddle wheels nervously churned the water into a dirty foam as the old tub prepared to dock at Speakman's Wharf at the foot of Chestnut Street. A handful of dock loungers grinned at the uncertain performance of the elderly and cranky craft and offered free and caustic advice to the pilot, obviously a practicing and very nervous amateur. The pilot rejected the advice profanely and loudly. He became so intent on the exchange of insults that he forgot what he was doing and the *Caxton Queen* blundered solidly into the wharf, greatly to the delight of the advisory board.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The ship was made fast. The engine sobbed wearily and became inert. Major Asbury minced ceremoniously down the gangplank, stroked his luxuriant whiskers and gave voice.

"Attention, prisoners of war!" he shrilled. "As your names are called by the sergeant, march down here and receive your discharge papers from a government that is still more than slightly suspicious."

He handed the sheaf of papers to the sergeant, a lean, toothless, morose individual, consulted a duplicate list which he carried. The sergeant called the first name. The mustering out was slow and tedious—the major purposely kept it that way. It was May and unseasonably hot. The men were hungry, weary from sleepless nights on the over-crowded boat. A few were visibly ill; and some still suffered from wounds. The major, however, insisted that the men stand rigidly at attention until officially discharged. Failure to obey this order would result in court martial he had announced shrilly.

AT LONG last, Ben Mason's name was called. He marched forward, reluctantly rendered the required salute. He signed two papers, the sergeant handed him his precious discharge which he stuffed in the front of his shirt. His trouser pockets had long since become holes and were no longer functional.

Politely, almost too politely, he asked the major if he might glance at the list of men awaiting discharge. Unsuspecting, the major complied with the request. Without glancing at it, Mason handed it to the astonished sergeant.

He turned toward Major Asbury. "I just wanted to be sure, you pampered, fat-headed skunk, that the list wouldn't be lost when I threw you off the dock," he said evenly. The major gasped angrily, tugged frantically at his ornate sword. He was no match for the lean, furiously angry young man who laid violent hands on his person. He screamed unhappily as Mason grabbed him by the prized whiskers and the seat of his uniform breeches, lifted him bodily and heaved him into the filthy river.

The sergeant took one quick step toward Mason, but, before the steady glare of Mason's eyes, he wisely stopped. Someone on the boat threw a rope to the major, who wasn't an expert swimmer by any means. Mason calmly walked to the edge of the wharf and looked down on the fat and unlovely countenance of the major who was energetically clinging to the rope and yelling for help. It wasn't a pretty sight, and Mason frankly said so. The remaining prisoners were grinning widely and approvingly. The dock loungers cheered the performance.

A whistle shrilled on the deck. The corporal was calling up the guard detachment, yelling for them to come on the double-quick. Mason, versed in cavalry tactics, knew that when faced by superior odds, it was the part of wisdom to retreat. He thumbed his nose arrogantly at the soldiers rushing down the gangplank and ran lightly up Chestnut Street, ducked through an alley into Walnut Street's wide sanctuary. Behind him he heard the confused baying of the guard detachment, the hysterical shrilling of Major Asbury. He was thankful it was dusk.

He slowed to a walk, for the boots hurt his feet cruelly. He was penniless, desperately hungry, filthy—a stranger in the biggest city he had ever known. But he wasn't entirely depressed. He had partially evened one score. He even essayed a whistle as he neared the center of the sprawling city.

II

HE WAS unpleasantly tired when he reached Broad Street. At the corner he paused, vainly tried to take stock, to determine what he should do. His eyes swung to the shop window against which he leaned. It was a bakery and the loaves of bread, the array of cakes, pies and cookies made his mouth water. Suddenly he realized that he had not eaten in two days, that the months he had spent in prison had seriously sapped his normal strength. He was weak, dizzy, shaking like a leaf. He straightened angrily, tightened his lips, clenched his fists. If he should be silly enough to collapse now the police would gather him in as a vagrant and he'd again find himself a prisoner. That must not happen. Besides, Major Asbury's men were probably not too far away.

He called on his last reserves of strength and plodded tediously, endlessly down Broad Street. He weaved drunkenly and people stared at his shabby, grim figure.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He must sit down, he realized, rest a little while or he was going to faint. Just ahead there was a large sidewalk sign and people were streaming through the open doors of the well-lighted Continental Hotel. Noise, laughter, strains of music, the hum of conversation, the smell of food emerged from the doors. He paused, got caught in the crowd and was forced through the open doors. He found himself blinking in the bright lights, heard himself being hospitably greeted by a slightly tipsey, smiling young man wearing plaids so violent Mason momentarily thought his eyes were playing tricks on him.

The man in plaids smiled and extended a hand that wore the biggest diamond Mason had ever seen. "Welcome to my little party," he beamed. "Make yourself at home with what I am pleased to call my friends."

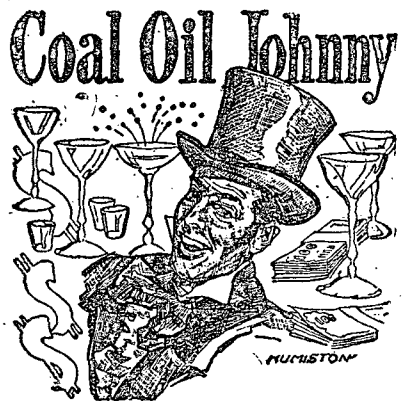
Mason stiffened in indignation. He was in no mood for jokes. He knew how he looked. All he wanted was just a place to rest, a chance to regain his strength. He started to say as much.

"Tobey! Where in hell is Tobey?" the man in the vivid plaids inquired loudly. A Negro clad in a uniform of blue and gold pushed through the milling crowd.

"Yes-sah, Mistah Steele!"

"A bottle of champagne and a tray of sandwiches for my young friend, here," commanded the man named Steele. "And a trifle of brandy for me, you rascal! Double-quick, boy!"

"Yes-sah!"



Mason collapsed into a deep and comfortable chair. Before he could say anything, the boy in the resplendent uniform was back with a huge silver tray piled high with chicken sandwiches, a bottle of champagne and a tall glass. He bowed and handed Steele the glass of brandy. Steele grinned his thanks and turned to greet a new group of people just arriving.

Mason sipped thirstily of the champagne. He had never tasted it before, but he gave it his instant approval. He slowly lifted a thickly filled sandwich, took a speculative and experimental bite. Forcing himself to chew it slowly, he savored its glorious taste. Then quickly, savagely, voraciously, he wolfed the last of it, grabbed for another and took a long, satisfying dring of the cold champagne. Strength flowed into him and his spirits soared. His host was greeting every guest, chatting gaily with them, weaving slightly as he drank more and more brandy.

Mason's basic hunger was appeased after his fifth sandwich; he nibbled on the sixth and started to pay more attention to what was happening, which was plenty.

He was gratified to note that many of the guests were garbed as sketchily and informally as he was. He lifted the bottle to pour out more of the delicious drink and was astonished to discover that it was empty. His Yankee conscience bothered him just a little; he had never been a drinker and to think that he had consumed an entire quart was something of a shock.

His host approached, a little unsteady but still wearing a broad smile. He bowed, nearly lost his balance. "More champagne here, Tobey!" he called. Mason didn't protest. He did not want to be impolite. Besides, he wanted more. Steele produced a thin perfecto, passed it on to Mason who lighted it; settled back in sheer enjoyment. It had been months since he had tasted tobacco and this was a very superlative sort of a cigar. He awkwardly expressed his gratitude.

Steele grinned. "Have a good time," he said graciously, but a trifle thickly. "You yell for Tobey if you want anything. I'm evening up a score tonight, b'God, and having a lot of fun doing it, too. Want my guests to have fun, too."

He weaved away, an arm across the shoulders of a harried and deeply worried man in sober black, a man who was waving his arms and talking a mile-a-minute.

"Ain't he a dinger?" the man in the next chair asked. "Whole city's talking about

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

him. Amazing, that's what it is. A Cassells' creation, a ten-ringed circus!"

The man was carelessly dressed, but clean. He had a long, sweeping yellow moustache, a merry eye and an engaging grin. He extended a hand.

"Name's Cassells—Chet Cassells. I'm a newspaper reporter, s'help me. Gotta sense of humor and a nose for news. Sense of humor, for the first time in my life, is paying dividends."

MASON gave his name, noted that his companion's eyes widened a little. "What's all this about?" he asked. Cassells reached down beside his chair, produced a bottle of brandy and a glass. He grinned widely. "Next to that, I like to talk. Listen, my friend, and I'll tell you about our host."

Mason listened attentively. The host, Cassells explained, was a young oil millionaire. Steele hadn't drilled any wells himself, but an aunt had owned some of the richest oil farms along Oil Creek, Pennsylvania. On her death the young man had inherited a cold million dollars and a daily income of about $3,000. The boy had only one ambition, Cassells claimed. That was to spend every red cent of the legacy—and do it fast. He hadn't been doing too well in attaining his objective when he first arrived in Philadelphia and taken up quarters in the Girard Hotel, just across the street.

"I was trying to dig up some news in this quiet and monumentally dull city," Cassells said, "and I dropped in to talk with the manager of the Girard. He told me the hotel had a new and exciting guest, a youngster from the oil fields who carried a carpetbag filled with greenbacks, and who never tipped less than $10. That sounded like NEWS to me, so I hunted up this chap. The manager was right. The young man was just a green country boy trying to have a good time and not knowing how to go about it. Lonesome, too. I introduced him to vintage champagne that morning and before I left we had become fast friends.

"I wrote a dinger of a story for my paper, an epic narrative of the country boy with millions to spend, a lad who needed friends and boon companions. Would the great city of Philadelphia, I asked, let this young man down? He had come to drink deep of our culture and there was a great moral obligation on the good people of the city. We must, I insisted, do something for this 'Coal Oil Johnny' from Franklin, Pennsylvania."

The name had caught the public fancy, Under the competent tutelage of Cassells, Steele started to spend wildly; his daily insanities made the headlines, greatly to the delight of his mentor, who often inspired them.

"He's a curious chap," Cassells commented, as he refilled his glass. "He's a reckless spender, an immoderate drinker and a luckless gambler. Yet, I'll be damned if he hasn't one great and outstanding virtue: women never attract him. Some of the liveliest jades in this city of Brotherly Love have made outright advances to him, but he always shakes them off with a grin. I like him. He's made a project of getting rid of this money, feels that he won't really be happy until it is done."

THE lobby, the dining room, the bar and the stairs of the big hotel were crowded with a milling, noisy crowd of men and women. The music, shouting, laughter and giggles blended into a pattern of cheer that Mason found agreeable and most soothing. His second bottle of champagne was well started. He found Cassells' conversation elevating and amusing. He wanted to hear more.

"Does this 'Coal Oil Johnny' own the hotel?" he inquired.

Cassells laughed, strangled on his brandy. "Just for tonight, my friend, just for tonight. Johnny came in here yesterday for a few pre-breakfast nips of brandy and the clerk became pretty nasty toward him and his guests. They were a little noisy, to tell the truth. Johnny is usually a peaceful and inoffensive chap but he took exception to the clerk's attitude, called on the manager of the hotel to fire the man instantly. The manager curtly refused. He saw a slightly drunken young man in well-tailored but gaudy clothes and he thought he'd humor him. Why not, the manager suggested, rent the hotel for a day and fire the clerk himself. Johnny liked the idea and asked what the rental would be. The manager named a price of $8,000, feeling the size of it would scare the young man right out of the office. Not Johnny! He whipped out a roll of bills, peeled off $8,000 and the deal was

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

made and the papers signed. We put a big sign outside saying that everything would be free tonight to all comers. First thing Johnny did was to fire the clerk. But he's soft hearted. Gave the dude two months' pay when he canned him.

"She's a party, ain't she? See that sad looking and excited man who dogs Johnny every place he goes? That's the hotel manager. He knows that he made a sorry bargain and he is begging Johnny to call the party off. Right now, things may start. There's blood on the moon, as sure as shooting. Look at that!"

DOWN the ornate bannister rail a girl slid, whooping wildly, waving a bottle in one free hand while her lifted skirts displayed an amazing length of pale pink striped hose. Her plump body struck the heavy and elaborate vase on the newel post, sent it crashing to the floor. The crowd cheered as she unsteadily gained her feet. The hotel manager yelped complaints, but no one listened to him.

An old beggar woman, fat, slovenly, threw her arms around him, kissed him soundly, advised him not to cry over a broken vase. A prankster held a lighted candle to his coat tails and they flared into flames as he danced in pain. Johnny Steele charged through the crowd, emptied a bottle of foaming champagne on the fire and extinguished it. He ordered the prankster thrown out and courteously told the manager to order a new coat and have the bill sent to him.

"He's got a good head, that Johnny," commented the newspaper man coolly. "You think he's drunk as a fiddler and all of a sudden he's sober as a judge—some judges, that is. There's a municipal judge over there at the entrance of the dining room who isn't as sober as he might be."

Mason looked. Suddenly a chill came over him, a sense of impending danger. The judge, a tall, stooped man with a head as bald as a billiard ball, was engaged in earnest conversation with a fat man in uniform. The man's head turned and Mason's suspicion was confirmed. It was Major Wellington Asbury.

Mason groaned. Cassells' friendly hand touched his knee. "I know all about it," he said quietly. "I told you I'm a newspaper man and this unpleasant major caught me just as I was leaving the office to come over here. He told me about a deserter named Mason, a pretty desperate and vicious character. Seems he is now thirsting for the blood of this Mason. But don't worry; I'll see that it never gets in the papers. Unless it's a pretty good story, that is. Suppose you tell me your side of it."

Mason's story was told. Meantime, he kept his eyes on the major. Cassells listened carefully, grinned in approval at the climax. Mason exhibited his discharge certificate. "He can't touch you, m'lad," Cassells assured him. "You did a great public service when you dunked him. I am imbued with a strange sense of mischief. What do you say we teach this offensive beggar another lesson?"

Cassells explained what he proposed and Mason was agreeable. It was a neat plan and Mason liked it. Cassells left and presently Mason saw him talking genially with the major, plying him with assorted drinks. In less than a half hour he was back, his face split into a grin. "Wasn't much of a job," he said apologetically. "Truth is, he was half over when I reached him. Two beakers of champagne liberally spiced with cigar ash did the trick. Come—and view the Army!"

They struggled through the noisy crowd, passed the dining room and entered a small cloak room adjacent to the hotel barber shop. Recumbent on the floor was the person of Major Wellington Asbury, a very drunken, insensible officer.

FIFTEEN minutes later the two conspirators left the room. Mason, however, was a new man. He was clean shaven, he wore a pair of blue trousers, obviously too large around the waist. His shirt was of spotless linen. On his feet were highly polished, very comfortable boots. Outside the door, the men paused and choked with laughter as they walked unsteadily away toward the lobby.

Back in the cloak room, Major Wellington Asbury was still insensible from drink. His appearance lacked much of being military. His shirt was torn, patched, dirty and much too small for him. The cotton trousers were inadequate. On his feet were ancient boots from which seven toes coyly peeked.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On the sidewalk in front of the hotel, Cassells found a policeman. As a reporter for a newspaper, Cassells explained, he felt it his bounden duty to report to the officer that the infamous deserter, Mason, could be found in the hotel cloak room. The officer was duly grateful. In a short time, a patrol wagon drove to the back of the hotel and three husky men in blue tossed the inert person of Major Asbury unceremoniously into the wagon. Cassells presented them with a bottle of brandy and his congratulations. They drove away, very happy, indeed.

Cassells danced a small jig. "Remind me to be at the police court in the morning," he said. "This should make a very nice story for my esteemed sheet. I can foresee some lively fireworks when the major tries to tell the court he is not Mason. My, oh my! What will the commanding officer in this area say when he hears about it? He will not be pleased, I am sure. Happens General Hamstead is a friend of mine. I'll not let the comedy merge into a tragedy, rest assured of that. This has been a glorious night my friend!"

Mason nodded gravely. He was astonished when he nearly lost his balance. "Chet let's go in and get something to eat. I'm starved again. Thirsty, too. What do you say?"

Cassells registered an affirmative vote for the drink. He had no desire for food, he said firmly.

Mason was curiously light-hearted as he munched happily on a thick roast beef sandwich which Tobey had produced magically. He sipped lightly another glass of champagne. It seemed, as a matter of fact, entirely fitting and proper. The new boots were exceedingly comfortable and the pants were not too bad. He felt fine, almost carefree.

The party was rapidly becoming disorderly. From the safety of the upper hall, the harried manager screamed down a flood of imprecations, cautions, pleas and outright threats. No one paid the slighest attention to him. Hasty and ill-advised quartettes and trios were improvised; songs, mostly off key, were being shouted above the clatter of smashing china, the roar of talk and laughter. A tipsy girl mounted to the clerk's desk, danced a breakdown to the erratic strains of a banjo. Someone had found candles, melted them on the lobby floor. A squat, blank-faced woman skated majestically on the slippery surface, *sans* skates, but with infinite grace and drunken dignity, greatly to the approval and amusement of the crowd. It was, Mason conceded, a neat and a very fine performance. He drained his glass of champagne without even noticing it.

A few minor fights had been broken up in their infancy. Cassells, however, was worried. He excused himself. "Gotta find Johnny," he explained. "Party's gonna get very rough and rowdy soon. Mus' get him out of here."

The hotel cat, a fat, genial Maltese, wandered in, gave the crowd a nasty, cold and disapproving look. It perched aloofly on the counter. A drunken man in loud clothes, an ugly twist on his brutal face, approached the cat with exaggerated evidence of affection, tied a tin can to its tail, tossed the animal to the floor with a howl of drunken delight. The cat screamed at the indignity, ran wildly through the crowd, howling and spitting, emitting a barrage of cat profanity. A girl in red captured the cat, removed the offending can, soothed the outraged creature into quietness.

"Lafe Billard, you should be ashamed of yourself" she cried. Steele, more sober than Mason assumed he would be, shouldered his way through the crowd, followed by Cassels. He faced Hillard.

"I saw what you did to that cat and I don't like it," he said with quiet dignity. "I don't like you or any part of you! This party was for fun. Not to hurt innocent animals. You are supposed to be a prize fighter. I'll bet you are a crooked one and not very good at your trade. I 'pologize to my guests for your presence."

Billard's face flushed; he roared in anger, rushed Steele who awkardly side-stepped and slipped on the candle-waxed floor. Billard lifted a heavy foot to kick him. Suddenly Mason found himself standing over the form of his host, facing the enraged Billard. How he got there, he wasn't too sure. But, all of a sudden, this was his quarrel. And, he was very happy about it.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Cassells, the merry look gone from his eyes, helping Steele to his feet. Billard was mouthing obscenities Mason didn't relish.

"Steele was right, you are pretty much of

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a maggot," he heard himself saying. "Suppose you stop yelling and try to do a little fighting, though I don't think it's in you."

Billard lowered his head and charged, arms flailing wildly. Mason side-stepped, jolted the man with a short and punishing left. The man grunted, whirled, lips drawn back in an ugly snarl. Quick as a flash, his right hand flicked out, roughly grazed Mason's unprotected jaw. Instantly, Mason began to respect the man's boxing ability. He stepped in close, whipped a short right and left to Billard's exposed midriff and was deeply gratified to hear a grunt of pain.

It wasn't a nice fight. Mason had to keep away from his opponent, forced to box adeptly, alertly. Once Billard tried to kick him. Mason quickly dodged, caught the uplifted foot and pushed smartly upward. Billard hit the floor with a resounding smack. In the bedlam of noise, Mason heard a cheer from Cassells, a shrill, banshee yelp. Billard scrambled to his feet, slightly groggy. Mason, alert to the opportunity, rushed in, pouring hard, punishing, short-arm blows into the fat body of the other man. Billard dropped his arms to protect himself. Mason, setting himself, swung a right hand against the unprotected jaw and Billard folded grotesquely, crumbled insensible to the floor.

Mason grinned briefly. He had won. But two major engagements were being carried out in the crowded lobby. Billard had friends; they resented what had happened. Coal Oil Johnny also had friends. They liked what had happened. The battle engaged furiously; chairs were being swung, bottles were being hurled with abandon and poor aim. Women were screaming, scampering out of the side doors. Shouts and profanity rent the smoke-filled air.

Mason felt a sharp tug at his arm. He wheeled, fist uplifted, his eyes blazing. He saw Cassels grinning widely, Coal Oil Johnny limply resting in his arms.

"A nice, a very active skirmish," he admitted. "Now is the time for us to get to hell out of this. Help me carry Johnny over to his rooms across the street, will you?"

They picked up the tall, limp figure. Mason was surprised to note that Johnny Steele was about his own age. As they departed, the place was rapidly becoming a shambles. Just before they went through the door, Mason clearly noted that the Maltese cat was safely perched on the top of a high book cupboard, gazing down on the melee with obvious distaste.

Three policemen stood at the door, ears cocked attentively to the riot ensuing inside. They grinned and touched their caps to Cassells.

"Morrissey," Cassells said to one of them, "I'm afraid there is a trifle of trouble back there that calls for some direct action on the part of the minions of the law. Enter, speak softly to them. Then, me fine lads, swing your clubs and do the necessary. If you do a good job, my paper will comment most favorably I assure you. Might I add that a bloke named Billard, a worthless individual who is no stranger to you, started the entire brawl. I trust you will not be too gentle with him."

The officers thanked Cassells politely, drew their clubs and entered the doors. Cassells smiled maliciously. "Now, my boy, lift your end and let's be moving," he instructed.

STEELE'S rooms in the Girard Hotel were gaudy, over-furnished, but very comfortable. They deposited the body on the bed. Tobey appeared, grinning widely, removed Steele's shoes and clothing, eased him into a red flannel nightshirt. Mason felt very good. When Cassells blandly suggested that a glass of brandy was in order, he nodded in quick approval. He raised the glass, a big one and brimming full, and swallowed the contents. He gasped, strangled, coughed and tears came to his eyes. It was his first experience with brandy.

Cassells swallowed his portion with the deftness that comes of long practice. "Amateur, eh!" he grunted. Mason rejected the charge vehemently, poured himself another glass and started to swallow it. It tasted fine, he started to say. He had extreme difficulty in enunciating the words, but this was a great truth and an abiding one that called for better understanding. He collapsed into a chair and fell fast asleep in the midst of trying to explain all of these things to the grinning Cassells.

That gentleman poured another drink and sighed. There was work to be done. He yelled for Tobey. They undressed Mason, laid him carefully beside the snoring Steele. Then Cassells removed his coat, sat down at a desk and wrote two stories for his news-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

paper. One was about the capture of the dangerous deserter, Mason. The other one, a highly humorous account of the affair at the Continental Hotel, covered eight pages. When the job was completed, Cassells had another drink, called for Tobey to take the scripts to the newspaper office. Then he undressed, blew out the lamps, carefully climbed over Mason and laid himself down between the two sleeping men. "No danger of falling out of bed if I do it this way," he said thickly and sagely.

When Tobey returned from delivering the stories to the newspaper office, he peered into the bedroom. The three recumbent forms were immobile, happily asleep. He shook his head in wonder and grinned widely.

III

IT WAS high noon when Mason unhappily awakened. He did not feel well. It was his first experience with a hangover and he didn't like it. Privately, while his eyes tried to focus in the light of day, he vowed it would never happen again. He sat up in bed and almost yelped with pain. Never had he experienced such a headache. The inside of his mouth had an unspeakably foul taste. Coal Oil Johnny was sleeping quietly, a half-smile on his face. Cassells, on his back, snored lustily, each breath blowing out the long yellow mustache.

Mason began to remember things. He crawled out of bed, noted that he was as naked as a jay bird in moulting time. By the time he had swallowed three glasses of cold water, he started to feel better.

Tobey appeared noiselessly with a tray bearing a big pot of coffee, three cups and saucers and a bottle of brandy. Cassells awakened, groaned, opened a speculative eye and gazed at Mason's naked body. Then he grinned weakly. "Tobey, my boy," he said plaintively, "a little of my usual nourishment for a weak and wavering spirit."

"Yes-sah!" Tobey half filled a cup with brandy, topped it off with steaming coffee. Cassells gulped it down noisily. He shook his head and grinned wryly. "Mason, try some of this medicine," he invited. "It's good for what ails you."

Mason shook his head. "Me, I'll stick to coffee. Just coffee! Somehow I have no hankering for brandy this morning."

As he sipped his coffee, he immediately began to feel immeasurably better. With the second cup he had sufficiently recovered to experience a healthy hunger. This he mentioned to Cassells who shuddered at the thought of food. Tobey heard, however, and did something practical about it. In a few minutes he was back with a big platter of ham and eggs and hot biscuits. Mason fell to with good appetite. Steele awakened, yawned prodigiously, peered morosely at the world through blood-shot, swollen eyes. Tobey filled a small glass of brandy and handed it to him. He tossed it down, shuddered and reached for a cup of coffee. On his third cup of coffee and his second glass of brandy, he suddenly grinned boyishly and looked around.

"Morning, Chet," he said huskily. He noticed Mason eating gustily and comfortably. He couldn't place him. "Good morning to you, sir," he said politely. "I am embarrassed when I can't recall names or faces. It sometimes makes me susppect that I might have taken a drop too much the night before." He smiled, reached for more coffee, glanced meaningly at Cassells.

Cassells hastened to make the introduction. "I'm going to like you," he said to Mason. "Like your looks. Man after my own heart. Breakfast eater—so'm I. City folks like Chet never relish victuals in the morning. Tobey!"

Tobey had been awaiting the call. He carried a big tray, stacked high with hot waffles and fried catfish. It developed that this was a favorite breakfast menu for Coal Oil Johnny. One sniff of the fish and Cassells withdrew to a corner of the room and consoled himself with more coffee and brandy.

STEELE, rapidly becoming more normal, inquired anxiously about the success of the party. Cassells explained in detail; he informed Steele about Major Wellington Asbury, about Mason's victory over Lafe Billard. Steele listened attentively and when the recital was completed, walked over to Mason and offered his hand.

"It seems that I am much indebted to you, sir," he said quietly. "I want you to know that I appreciate what you did. I'm the ir-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

responsible spendthrift and the casual drunk- and Cassells and his compatriots say. But I'm not insensible to gratitude. Mostly, I guess that I'm just a plain damned fool who feels that he has to spend a fortune he didn't earn before he can be happy again."

Neither Mason nor Cassells answered. The men talked about various things and Tobey brought in the morning papers. Cassell's two stories were given front page prominence in one newspaper. A rival paper stated bluntly that the man arrested as Mason was, in reality, one Major Asbury, who claimed that he had been drugged, assaulted and robbed. Mason, the deserter, was described as a vicious character. He was also rather faithfully described as to physical appearance and it was suggested that he might be found wearing the uniform of a major.

Steele paced restlessly up and down the room, smoking his morning cigar. Suddenly he wheeled and stood before Mason.

"If you stay here, they will capture you, sure as the devil. Can't have that! I'll tell you what; you are about my size. You put on one of my suits. I'll have my carriage take you to the Broad Street Station. They'll never suspect a friend of Coal Oil Johnny. We will drive right down the street, right under the noses of the police and military. Chet, you're a master of intrigue and dubious strategy. How does that strike you?"

Cassells nodded admiringly. "You think more clearly than I do this early in the morning, Johnny," he admitted. "The scheme is perfect. We can have a little fun doing it and partially repay our young friend for what he did last night."

Mason was shown into the bathroom, the first he had ever seen. He bathed and scrubbed, shaved and emerged feeling a new man, his headache nearly gone. He climbed into the fine linen Tobey supplied. The suit given him fitted perfectly, but the loudness of its pattern rather shocked Mason's conservative soul. It was a loud and vehement plaid; the waistcoat was a vivid yellow and the scarf a violent purple.

Cassells and Steele gazed at Mason approvingly. "B'Gad, sir, I wish you could stay here as my permanent guest!" Steele cried.

Tobey produced a small valise packed with clean linen, extra shirts and cravats and toilet articles. Steele was dressed for the street, dressed to the extrme in Mason's opinion. However, Steele was in high good humor. He opened a large carpetbag which he asked Tobey to bring. It was filled, to Mason's astonishment, with rolls and packets of greenbacks, more money than Mason had ever seen before. Steele stripped off several bills, thrust them into Mason's hands.

"Not a word out of you!" he said quietly. "You will need money for railroad fare. You will have to eat; you will need money when you reach your destination. Consider this a loan, if you wish."

Mason was deeply grateful and incoherent. He instinctively liked Steele and Cassells. They were irresponsible but generous. He had been fortunate in falling into their hands. He said as much and they only laughed.

Tobey had been sent for the carriage. "Wait until you see it, Mason," Cassells said with a chuckle. "It will open your eyes, all right! I designed it in one of my more sober moments. I created a coat of arms and I dreamed up a color scheme that is a sheer magic of harmony. My genius was never in better form than when I designed this carriage of Johnny's."

Steele cried, "It's all Chet says it is. Now, let's be serious for a moment. You don't want to go back home to New Hampshire. With this trouble hanging over you, I think you are wise. It will blow over in a few months. You want to earn some money, get some meat back on your bones before you see your people. You want to be an independent man—that's good, too.

"I think I have the perfect prescription for you. Buy yourself a railroad ticket to Titusville, Pennsylvania. That's where they drilled the first oil well. But don't stay there. Take the stage to Pithole City, about fifteen miles away. It's a boom oil town, a wild and lively place. You can make or lose a fortune there in a single day. They struck the first flowing oil wells there. A gentleman can find all of the excitement he craves. Wages are high. I often wish I was there instead of down here. I had fun when I hauled oil. I know a lot of people in the oil business. Some of them are in Pithole City.

"A few words of warning. Pithole City is crowded with crooks. One of them is a man named Ed Embrey. He is usually outwardly

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

respectable but he would steal anything from a red hot stove to an empty cellar. He clipped me for $35,000 one time when I had a few too many drinks. Did it within the law, too. That's the way he works. If you ever get a chance to pin his ears back, do it and consider any debt between us as being paid in full."

Tobey announced the carriage. They went down stairs to find a crowd waiting in the lobby; gamblers, hangers-on, alleged friends, all waiting to see Coal Oil Johnny. In the background Mason detected the unshaven, still worried countenance of the manager of the Continental Hotel, fighting to edge through the crowd. Johnny greeted the crowd cheerily with uplifted cane and a ready smile.

"Gentlemen, greetings! I will see you later. I'm seeing an old friend off on the train. In the meantime, will you kindly repair to the bar as my guests and partake of whatever your private thirsts demand."

They escaped to the curb. The carriage was all that Cassells had said. Mason had never seen its equal outside of a circus. The wheels were a glistening red, striped in green. The body of the carriage was deep blue and gold and on the wide doors was displayed the Cassell-inspired coat of arms, a great shield of yellow, quartered in bold black enamel. On the quarters appeared oil derricks, tanks, drilling wells, engines, all done in violent and dramatic colors. Inside, the cushions were of white leather. The horses were two black, perfectly groomed stallions, brave in a harness of white leather studded with gold and silver ornaments. The driver was a tall Negro dressed in a tailored black broadcloth uniform decked with silver buttons and gold frogs. Mason whistled softly as he climbed in and sank into the deep, soft cushions. Cassells had been truthful . . . this was a regal carriage, to say the least.

The drive to the depot was like a parade. Police at street intersections waved cheerily to Steele. Once he stopped and handed three large bills to one policeman.

"Cassells tells me that you did a great job in breaking up the party last night, Morrissey. I appreciate the way you handled it. You and the boys have a little party on me."

Morrissey's red face split into a wide grin. "Thank ye kindly, Mister Steele," he acknowledged. "Mister Cassells, we sure worked on that Lafe Billard. He ain't feeling so good this morning."

Cassells smiled maliciously. "Excellent, Officer Morrissey!" he exclaimed. "Your efficiency will make you a sergeant, sure as anything. See if I am not right."

At the Broad Street Station a porter grabbed Mason's luggage. Coal Oil Johnny tossed him a bill in a careless gesture. His unstudied generosity was sincere and thoughtful. Cassells said goodbye, gruffly wished him luck. "Can't tell, I may turn up in the oil fields myself some of these days," he said.

Steele gripped Mason's hand hard. "One other thing," he explained a little awkwardly, above the din of arriving and departing trains. "If you have a chance, there's a girl up there in Pithole City, look her up. Name's Susan McBride. You can trust her. Wish I had, but it's too late now. She will want a report on me. Give it to her straight. Be honest, tell her I'm still a fool, that I'm spending my aunt's money as fast as I can, doing all kinds of crazy things."

He paused, his thoughts far away. Suddenly his voice was tired, hopeless. "Tell her I sent my best," he said softly. "Not that it will make any difference to her."

He turned and walked quickly away, with Cassells' arm linked in his. As he climbed aboard the train, Mason was acutely aware that he had been permitted to see a side of Johnny Steele that the man usually kept hidden.

He settled in his seat as the train jerked its tedious way to the other end of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. He relaxed, wondered sleepily what had become of Major Asbury. The score had been settled, he didn't much care, to tell the truth. As he drifted off to sleep he wondered if he would ever again see Steele and Cassels, or if he would ever meet Susan McBride or Embrey.

IV

THE road was unbelievably rough. Mason shared a precarious seat with the stagecoach driver on the fifteen-mile trip from Titusville to Pithole City. The inside of the coach was filled with passengers. Strapped

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to the top of the lurching stage was a gaudy, ornate coffin.

The driver, a thin, angular individual with patches of mousy whiskers adorning his weather-beaten face, tooled his four horses expertly through a maze of heavy, sluggish traffic. He was not a taciturn man.

"That there coffin's for Wealthy Dunham," he volunteered. "Paid for by some of the richest oil men in Pithole City. That Wealthy sure was popular. Always in demand. Best girl Ben Hagan ever had. Then she was took sick with sumpthin' that took her off just like that!" And he snapped dirty fingers to give emphasis.

MASON was more fascinated by the variety of the traffic than by the driver's incessant flow of information. Coming from the direction of Pithole City was a steady and unbroken stream of wagons loaded with barrels of oil destined for the oil refineries of Titusville, or the railroad at Miller Farm. There were men on horseback: land speculators, oil producers and oil scouts, men with cheerful, purposeful faces, their clothing and boots liberally spotted with sand pumpings. Mostly, they were riding good horses, he noted. He knew and admired good saddle horses, as would any cavalryman. Only a few carriages jolted over the rough and rutted road that wound aimlessly through patches of woods and indifferent farmland and a scatter of houses at Pleasantville and at Bean Farm.

"Gonna have us a plank road runnin' from the City to Titusville," the driver said pridefully. "It will be the best road in the world, b'God. Toll road, too. Pithole City, she's growing every day. Right now, she's the third biggest town in the State. When we get to the top of the next hill you can see her, mister."

His pale blue eyes swept shrewdly across the obviously flashy clothes Mason was wearing. "You a gamblin' man?" he asked reasonably. Most emphatically he was not, Mason informed him crisply, somewhat shocked.

"Them clothes, they look as though you was," the driver said apologetically and defensively. "Just gonna say, if you planned on openin' some games, you'd better see Ben Hagan. What he says usually goes in Pithole, whether you're peddlin' drugs, women, likker or games of chance. 'Tain't healthy to oppose him, the dirty skunk!"

Hagan was an ex-prize fighter, the driver explained at some length. Also, he had served as a spy for both sides during the recent war. At the same time, too. He was teamed up with a girl who had also been in the spy business, a red-headed wench no better than she should be. Devil on wheels, but real purty, the driver said, smacking his lips noisily. Named French Kate, she was.

It was dusk when the stage stopped at the top of the hill to wind the tired horses. "Thar she is!" the driver announced, pointing his whip through the pale dusk.

Mason stood up and looked. Below stretched a long, wide valley. Along the near side hill ranged a sprawling city, a surprising collection of wooden buildings; some were large and pretentious, a few were hastily erected shacks with false fronts. The streets were thronged. Surrounding the town and down through the valley as far as the eye could reach, were hundreds of oil derricks, poking gaunt skeleton frameworks against the evening sky. Smoke billowed from the boilers, threaded upward in wisps of pale blue. Steam spurted in quick breaths from the engines; walking beams danced busily and noisily up and down. In the flickering light of derrick lamps, men moved at the business of drilling oil wells, probing deep beneath the surface for a hidden store of liquid wealth.

There was no silence; the walking beams creaked, the rumble of wagons was an incessant thing, almost tangible. The shouts of the wagon drivers, the sound of sledges fashioning red-hot drilling bits, the muted sound of hooves in the dust made a distinctive pattern of sound.

There was a curiously new and exciting smell in the air, unfamiliar to Mason's nostrils. "That's the smell of crude oil, my friend, the stuff they drill for," the driver informed him. "Once you smell it, the sayin' is that you'll be around the oil fields all the rest of your natural life."

The stage swung smartly to the left and rumbled slowly into the heavy traffic of turbulent Holmden Street. It stopped with something of a flourish before a big frame structure, the narrow porch of which was crowded.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Danforth House!" the driver keened. "All out!"

A woman, young, short, infinitely graceful, dressed in pale green, walked swiftly toward the stage. Her hair was red-gold, her face was impish and her eyes a cold gray. Her lips were carmine. She gazed past Mason, up at the coffin.

"Thank heavens!" she exclaimed in a rich husky voice. "Good of you, Pete, to bring it. Poor Wealthy! Now she can have a fitting funeral. Looks like a real nice coffin, too."

Mason helped to untie the ropes and the coffin slid into the waiting hands of four men. "Take it up to the saloon," the girl ordered crisply. "Let people know, especially the right ones, that services will be tomorrow morning at ten. Tell Ben I'll be along shortly."

MASON climbed down to the boardwalk, found himself facing the girl. She was small, almost tiny, but there was about her an atmosphere of strength and vitality that belied the small stature. She was undeniably beautiful and alluring. She calmly measured him and the gray eyes were speculative as she took in the details of his clothes.

"Listen, my bucko," she said, her lips in a straight hard line. "This town isn't big enough for any more gambling joints. Don't try to start one, or it will be smashed and you will be run out of town. We might be able to use another man at the faro table. Come up and see Ben tonight. If he's sober, he might hire you."

"I'm not a gambler!" Mason snorted angrily. "I'm not interested in that kind of a job."

She chuckled and it was a lovely thing to hear. "Well," she answered defensively, "you certainly look like one in that outfit." She started to turn away, then returned, planted her small person squarely in front of him.

"What *is* your business?" she inquired directly.

Mason caught the lurking devil in the gray eyes and it served as a challenge to him.

"It might be my business to know you better," he replied calmly.

Her lips crinkled into a mocking smile. "A dangerous business," she warned huskily, touching the lapel of the offending coat. "Most people who know French Kate get into trouble, my venturesome friend. I have many mortgages on me. A few of them have been foreclosed. If you are really anxious to engage in this business you mention, be at Stonehouse Jack's tonight at eleven—perhaps it might be furthered."

She was gone in a bewildering swirl of green skirts and her laugh floated back to him tauntingly through the noise of the street crowd.

A heavy, possessive hand fell on his shoulder. He turned to face a man about his own age, a man who looked him squarely in the eyes, a man whose mouth had an ugly twist.

"I don't know who you are, my friend," the man said quietly, "but take my advice, stay away from French Kate. She's bad luck! Monkey with her and you will get into trouble, clear up to that purple scarf you are wearing, just as sure as my name's Ed Embrey!"

Embrey! This must be the man Coal Oil Johnny had told him about. Mason was tired, irritable—and the man's tone had been offensive and provocative. "So you are Embrey?" he said softly. "I have a message for you from a friend of mine, a man you once swindled. Name of Steele, better known as Coal Oil Johnny. A very white man, which you are not. Here's his message!"

Steele swung savagely, from the knees. His fist cracked solidly into Embrey's chin and the man folded neatly, sprawled awkwardly on the plank walk. Mason felt better. Another score almost evened—a little of what he owed Steele had been repaid.

The crowd milled close and from it emerged four very tough, rugged and purposeful individuals. They edged furtively toward Mason. Friends of Embrey, beyond doubt. Mason tensed himself for an inevitable fight against odds. One of the men lunged for him. He side-stepped, flashed in a quick, potent blow to the man's face. The three other men rushed him as a unit. Out of the crowd stepped a tall man, his flannel shirt open at the throat, boots splashed with mud, a man who wore a wide grin on his round face. He didn't waste time. He neatly tripped one thug, pushed him into a com-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

panion and they both fell, cursing. Together, back-to-back, he and Mason slugged it out against the four men. The man Mason hit first was wary, circling cautiously, waiting for the chance to drive in a decisive blow.

Mason's companion was a wonder with his fists. He fought fairly until one of the men tried to kick him in the groin. Then he roared in anger and the grin disappeared. He feinted the man into a bad position, then mercilessly kicked him on the chin. The man dropped as though dead. Mason's savior wheeled, rushed at the man on the outskirts, who swiftly dodged into the safety of the jeering crowd. The good fighter returned, just in time to meet the rush of one of the thugs. This man he dropped with two fast blows to the head. Mason, in the meantime, had encountered heavy going. His opponent out-weighed him by fifty pounds and was, moreover, a pretty good boxer. Mason felt one eye closing under a barrage of blows. His fighting companion, standing alert and relaxed, watched the fight closely.

"His belly's wide open," he shouted. "Work on it, my boy!" Mason heard and heeded. He absorbed punishing blows, but he stubbornly followed advice, placing a succession of telling blows in the man's midriff. The man weakened, reeled and dropped soggily to his knees, bleeding from the mouth and gasping for breath.

Mason weaved a little, but his companion's arm was across his shoulders, holding him steady until he got his bearings. The stranger was grinning again, a wide, infectious grin.

Embrey was slowly getting to his feet. Mason shook off the protecting arm, advanced and faced him. "Would you like a further message from Johnny Steele?" he inquired softly. Embrey's eyes swung to the three forms on the sidewalk. He slowly shook his head.

"There will be an answer some of these days," he rasped, "a reply you may not be able to transmit to your drunken friend." His eyes had cleared and he winced as he noted Mason's fighting companion. "Van Syckle, you always happen around at the wrong time," he choked. "Why don't you give up your crazy scheme? The teamsters are up in arms and your life won't be worth a Confederate greenback."

Van Syckle continued to grin. "They tell me that you are a gambler, Embrey, when you are sure you can win. Want to make a bet I'll not build and operate my pipeline? Any sum you want to wager! Tell your friend Bryan that I'm ready for whatever he sends. It will be returned with compound interest. I'm making my own law, Embrey, and it's going to be hard on those who try to break it."

Embrey didn't answer. His face was a white mask of hate as he turned into the crowd and out of sight. "My name's Van Syckle, as you must now know," the man in the flannel shirt said. "Got mixed up in your fight because I don't like to see a man ganged. Matter of fact, I like a fight."

Mason wiped his face. It was very sore. He smiled wearily, thanked Van Syckle for his services, introduced himself briefly.

"Let's go up to my room and wash up," Van Syckle invited. "A drink might be in order just to drink confusion to Embrey and all the other rascals in this interesting town."

The two men instinctively liked one another. It didn't take them long to become acquainted. Mason told his story with complete frankness. He had left, he explained ruefully, only a few dollars of the sum given him by Coal Oil Johnny. He needed a job and soon, he said.

"Work is plenty here," Van Syckle said. "Wages are high. You won't have any trouble getting work. Matter of fact, I think I'd like to hire you myself. I like the way you fight, like the look in your eyes. I've got a tough job ahead of me, one where there will be plenty of fighting, I suspect. I need a man who will be loyal to me, who can work and fight and who can use his head. Suppose I tell you about it."

Van Syckle, it developed, was an inventor and an engineer. He was a man of ideas. Oil fields, he explained, were seldom drilled close to refineries or railroads. This meant that the oil from the wells had to be hauled to market in wagons. In and around Pithole City, over six thousand teams were engaged in this lucrative work.

"These teamsters have an organization headed by a scoundrel named Bryan," Van Syckle said. "They are bleeding the oil producers white with their hauling charges. No

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

oil producer minds paying a reasonable transportation charge, but these gluttons are heaping it on beyond reason. It's a monopoly. Hauling charges are even going up.

"Why don't the producers haul their own oil? Several have tried it. Their horses were hamstrung, the drivers beaten, tarred and feathered. Stock tanks were burned, oil machinery smashed. That stopped it—dead! I think Embrey is behind Bryan and his teamsters and that he gets a cut on every barrel of oil hauled. Can't be proven, however. Wouldn't do any good if we could prove there is a conspiracy. There's no law in the oil fields but the law of might."

A FEW years before, Van Syckle went on, a man named Hutchings had come to the oil fields with the sensational idea of building an iron pipeline through which oil could be pumped. He had built an experimental stretch of the pipeline. It leaked furiously. "Like a fifty-cent umbrella!" as the Oil City newspaper told about it. However, Hutchings had proven that the plan was feasible, providing that pipe with tight joints could be secured. The teamsters promptly tore up the pipeline in the night. Hutchings went away, raised more money, returned to try again. Once more the teamsters tore up the line, smashed the engine and pumps into a jumble. Hutchings' courage wavered. He died of a broken heart.

"I am building my own pipeline," Van Syckle said thoughtfully. "I have plenty of financial backing. The line will run between here and the railroad at Miller Farm. It will work. I will break this monopoly and give the oil producers a chance to exist and expand their operations. They desperately need cheap and dependable transportation of crude oil. I have contracted for good pipe; I have good engines and pumps on their way. Quietly, the oil producers are on my side. They are afraid to back me openly. The teamsters watch every move I make. Outwardly, I'm a man without friends. I'll build my pipeline and operate, come hell or high water. I can't turn to the law for protection, for there is no law. A few months ago this was a poor farming community, now it's a city of over thirty thousand—and without any law enforcement agency. Land is being sold for amazing sums, as much as a million dollars for one hundred acres. My job won't be easy. How would you like to go to work for me? I'll pay you a decent salary. More, you can bunk with me. That should be a big inducement, for you can't buy a decent bed in this mad city. What do you say, Mason?"

Mason reached out a hand. "I'm hired!" he agreed gratefully. "I'm ready to go to work in the morning. Then I'd like an advance, enough to buy some working clothes. I'd like to get rid of these infernal things I'm wearing."

Van Syckle threw back his head and laughed. "I don't blame you, Ben. That can be arranged. Anything else?"

"Yes," Mason said reflectively, tenderly fingering an eye that was nearly closed. "Tell me where I can find a place called Stonehouse Jack's—I have a trifle of business there at eleven tonight."

Sam Van Syckle whistled softly. "A pretty tough joint, I hear," he warned. "Going to see anyone in particular?"

Mason flushed. "Girl named French Kate," he admitted.

This time Mason's companion whistled long and loud. "It happens that Ed Embrey is pretty fond of Kate," he said. "He won't be pleased if he hears about it."

As Mason left Van Syckle's rooms he almost collided with a gigantic Negro making a hurried but laborious way up the stairs. The Negro, in turn, had nearly been run down by a chambermaid who was coming swiftly down. The reason for his labored progress was easily apparent. He wore a wooden peg leg, handled it awkwardly. He was obviously excited, a little frightened.

On the landing above, a tall girl in black seemed anxiously to await the arrival of the Negro. As Mason continued down the stairs he heard the man's heavy voice raised, heard the girl caution him to lower his tone.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

V

ED EMBREY, nursing an ugly blue bruise on his jaw, lighted a cheroot, deliberately blew the smoke into Ben Hagan's face. He was in a bitter humor and he didn't care who knew it.

Bryan, the boss of the teamsters, was hunched on a low stool. He resembled a frog in appearance. When he spoke, which wasn't often, his voice was an ugly croak. He needed a shave and his hands were always nervous and dirty.

"How did this fight start?" he questioned curiously.

Embrey drew deeply on the cheroot and the end glowed in the poorly lighted room. Hagan was watching closely, eager to hear the answer, which Embrey decided to qualify.

"It just happened, that's all," he said casually. "I didn't like this man's looks and said so. He hit me when I wasn't looking."

French Kate's laugh was taunting. She suspected why Embrey didn't tell the truth. She had heard the noise of the fight and had quietly watched part of it from the outskirts of the crowd. She liked to watch fights. Embrey's eyes narrowed. "What's so funny, Kate?" he asked, and his voice was icy.

The laugh dwindled into a smile, a soft, alluring crinkle of the red lips. "Don't be so cross, Ed," she counseled. "It isn't like you."

"It ain't like him, neither, to go and pick a fight with a stranger," Hagan remarked. He decanted four fingers of brandy into a soiled drinking glass and downed it noisily, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Let's talk about something important," Embrey said incisively. "We know this man's name is Mason. We know that Van Syckle and Mason went off together and they are probably pretty thick by this time. Van Syckle needs a man like this Mason seems to be, needs him a lot. Be too bad for us if they teamed up."

There was a low, furtive knock on the door. French Kate opened it, talked in a low tone to someone. She returned, walked over to Bryan. "One of your chambermaid friends looking for you," she said insolently. "She wants to see you now. If you owe her money, go out and pay it."

Bryan left the room and when he returned in a few minutes an ugly grin creased his round, red face.

"Well," he informed them triumphantly, "that was a gal from the Danforth House, chambermaid like you said, Kate. Useful gal in many ways." He paused and licked his thick red lips.

"Seems Van Syckle and this new man has teamed up for sure. Mason's gonna work for Van. She listened at the keyhole. A good job, too—worth every cent of the $10 I gave her."

Embrey snorted. "Knowing you as well as I do, Bryan, I imagine if she got a dollar she was lucky!"

Bryan ignored the thrust. "That ain't all I learned, neither." His fishy eyes were fastened on French Kate. "Seems that about eleven tonight, this Mason's gonna be at Stonehouse Jack's. Gonna meet a girl. He's new here, doesn't know anyone but Van Syckle. He'd never be missed! If we do anything, tonight's the time."

"I know a better place for it to happen than at Jack's." There was venom in Hagan's voice.

Embrey's cool voice cut in on them. "You fools, don't you realize that this thing requires some careful planning? Even if there's no law in Pithole City, you can't walk into a saloon and kill a man and not get into trouble. I agree, we should get rid of any man who's goin' to be an ally of Sam Van Syckle's. Besides, I owe this man a little personal punishment. This needs some planning."

Bryan reached for the brandy bottle, placed the neck between discolored, jagged teeth, drained the bottle and threw it in the corner. His pig eyes were cruel. "It can be fixed, easy as anything. Simple! Have Kate go over there. Let her make a big play for the fellow. While she's doin' it, Ben comes in. Outraged husband—blast his head off, like that!"

Embrey smiled quietly, flicked his eyes toward Kate. "A natural course of events," he said quietly. "Wouldn't be the first time you shot a man, would it, Ben?"

Hagan's gross body tensed and a look of cunning swept over the brutal face. "I don't shoot men in front of crowds," he sneered. "Made a habit of not doing it for years. It's bad luck! I got a better plan. Let's

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stage one of our raids on Jack's place—he's got one coming to him. In the fracas, smash the lights. Then I'll fix the feller. It will be expensive, Ed, damned expensive."

Embrey nodded. "Well, maybe that's the best arrangement. Only I want a good job done. No bungling! Like to be there and see the fun, Kate?"

"I wouldn't miss it for anything," she said with a tinkling laugh. "Matter of fact, I planned on dropping in on Jack tonight anyway, just to see if he's stealing any of our regular customers." She swept a triumphant glance at Bryan. She had taken the play away from him, made it impossible for him to tell Hagan that she already had an appointment with Mason.

Outside, as they fell to planning details, the sign in front of Hagan's place creaked endlessly in the wind. "Ben Hagan, The Wickedest Man in the World," the sign proclaimed. In the minds of many citizens of Pithole City, the sign was no understatement. Many of them, nevertheless, congregated in Hagan's place. They were invariably noisy. The bedlam they created was so great that the four people in the dingy room didn't hear the excited tapping of Hobey Sutton's peg leg as he tried to move swiftly and stealthily down the hall. He was a big man, but he had just heard something that frightened him, chilled his blood. His eyes rolled, showing a great expanse of white as he pushed out through the swinging doors and hurried up the street toward the Danforth House.

MASON was strangely cheerful as he pushed his way up crowded Holmden Street. When he reached the open doors of the big establishment owned by Stonehouse Jack's, however, he started to feel rather depressed. One of his eyes was swollen nearly shut and he realized that he was very tired.

He edged quietly into the crowd at the long bar, ordered a glass of beer and drank it slowly as he looked around the big room. The further end, he noted, was devoted to gambling and the tables were crowded with noisy men. A fiddle, a guitar and a fife provided music of a sort for desultory and sedate dancing. The air was filled with conversation and smoke. Men were talking about oil strikes, about things that were foreign to his understanding, oil field terms, he suspected correctly. He looked in vain for the red-gold of French Kate's hair, the sheen of her gown.

He turned to order another beer. As he did so, he saw her enter from a side door. A black jeweled band encircled the gorgeous hair and the small, perfectly formed body was sheathed in a revealing black gown. She was accompanied by a tall, broad shouldered man with a closely cropped head. He wore a blue jersey that adequately set off a physique which automatically marked him as a prize fighter or a wrestler. The man was smiling, revealing good teeth, and there was something impish in the wide blue eyes flanked by deep laughing wrinkles. His nose was flat and Mason suspected that he had not been born that way. He walked lightly, handled his weight with ease and grace.

"That's Stonehouse Jack hisself," a mud-splattered driller at the bar beside Mason breathed enviously. "A good man, s'help me! He's a fighter, used to be pretty good, too. Runs a straight house here, honest games and no women upstairs. Can handle cards like a magician, but seldom plays. Hell on wheels, Jack is. Loves to fight, even when he isn't paid for it. Doesn't drink. Hates Ben Hagan's guts and every once in a while

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

goes up to Ben's place and personally wrecks it. Ben has threatened to shoot Jack, but Jack just laughs at him. Nope, Jack doesn't like Ben. He even tries to steal Ben's girl, not that he cares for her, but he knows it gravels Ben. He's a man, m'friend!"

Stonehouse Jack and Kate were sitting at a small table against the wall. He was drinking coffee and grinning happily as she sipped a glass of brandy in a somewhat absent-minded manner.

Mason was so entranced in feasting his eyes on French Kate that he failed to notice the unobtrusive entrance of another girl and a man. The man was obviously blind; his eyes were concealed by dark glasses. His well-kept white hair was worn long. A face seamed with tragic lines broke into a grateful smile as his companion guided him deftly to a chair. The girl was tall, quietly dressed. Her hair was shining black, her eyes deep-set and fine, her mouth generously wide. She nodded to Stonehouse Jack and his face reddened with pleasure as he acknowledged the greeting. Kate's exquisite little body stiffened in obvious anger and she quickly reached out a possessive hand to Jack's face in a caress.

Mason set down his glass, walked slowly toward her table. She saw him coming, half rose in apparent eagerness and her smile became a warm magnetic invitation for him to hurry. He bowed as he reached her side and smiled as she reached out a small, heavily ringed hand to him.

"This is the man I told you about," she explained to Jack. "I'm told he maltreated Ed Embrey very badly this evening. Also, that he and Van Syckle whipped four of Ed's best boys."

Stonehouse Jack's eyes took a quick inventory of Mason's appearance. He chuckled. "Congratulations! You seem to have suffered a minor wound in the fracas. You a gambler?"

Mason's face flamed as Kate's rippling laugh broke out. "No!" he said flatly. "Don't let these clothes fool you. They are borrowed. I work for Sam Van Syckle."

"A good man," Stonehouse Jack admitted. "He needs good men around him these days. Lot of tough scallywags around here who don't like him or what he is going to do. Kate's sweet little friend, Hagan, for one. Embrey for another. I'd toss in Bryan and his teamsters, too, just for good measure."

"Lordy, Jack, don't you like anyone?" Kate inquired archly, pursing up a kissable mouth, her eyes wide. He squirmed uncomfortably in his seat but his eyes looked straight into hers. "You know damned well, Kate, I don't like that gang. I'd like to see them all hung, as they deserve. Watch out for them, Mason. Will you join us in a drink, sir?"

Mason nodded absently. Jack turned to call a waiter, Kate leaned over and lightly patted Mason's knee, smiled warmly and then promptly composed her mobile features before Jack could turn around.

AS THE waiter brought the drink, a minor disturbance became apparent in the vicinity of the faro table. Jack excused himself, strode back to quell the fracas. Quick to take advantage of the situation, Kate leaned forward, kissed Mason squarely on the lips. The heady, exciting perfume of her hair swirled around him. He returned the kiss with interest. It seemed the thing to do. "Come to Ben's tomorrow night," she whispered. "We can be alone—unless you are afraid of a little danger."

Her hands were on his, her eyes deeply provocative. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jack returning. Before he could compose himself, he was conscious of a light touch on his shoulder. He looked up in surprise. The tall, well-proportioned girl he had noticed at the next table with the blind man stood there, looking down at him with a timid, half-smile.

"Would you care to dance with me, Mr. Mason?" she asked surprisingly. There was music in her voice. He was confused. He got to his feet almost against his will. As they stood together for a moment before moving off to the uncertain waltz music, Mason saw Jack's wide grin of approbation, and, beyond it, Kate's lovely mouth twisted unpleasantly.

The tall girl was a good dancer. He looked at her appraisingly. Her face was flushed and she looked angry. She spoke in a low tone that was almost a whisper. "I want you to understand that I have no personal desire to dance with you. I don't make a habit of asking men to dance with me!"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She continued fiercely. "You fool! I'm trying to save you! You're a marked man. Ed Embrey wants you out of the way and French Kate is his bait. Pah! A pretty woman with no principles, a kiss! Are all men as soft as that?"

He stiffened in surprise. Then he chuckled as he looked at her frankly and approvingly. "A pretty girl and a kiss can do a lot with a man," he confessed. "I'll bet you could easily prove that. But I'll also bet that you are not unprincipled."

Unexpectedly she laughed, a rich, vibrant laugh, wholly sincere and infectious. The erratic music ended with a jangle. As he guided her back to the table she explained hastily that her name was Susan McBride and that her companion was her uncle, Pyranus Potter. The men shook hands as she introduced them. The blind man did not resume his seat but, with a cultivated and cautious manner, in a gentle voice, he expressed an urgent desire to leave at once.

Susan McBride agreed and turned to Mason. "Please, will you come with us? Soon it will be too late!" There was an urgency in her voice which could not be denied and Mason consented. French Kate had risen and was standing beyond her table, glaring at them. As they started to leave by the side door, something happened suddenly at the front entrance. There were shouts, cursing, the noise of smashing wood, the sudden milling of fighting men. Mason heard a high war-cry from Stonehouse Jack, saw him plunge into the thick of the battle.

Susan McBride urged him on. "Quickly, you can't stop!" They escaped into the semi-darkness outside and walked briskly down the street, away from the growing tumult.

"Just what I expected," said this surprising girl. "The lights will be smashed about now—that's when Hagan was going to kill you. Very simple plan, wasn't it, Mr. Mason?"

"How did you know about it?" he snapped back at her. "And just how did you know my name? I've only been in town a few hours."

She smiled in the half-light. "I have certain avenues of information," she admitted quietly. Mason found himself confused and angry.

"I guess I've been a sucker, haven't I?" he said ruefully. "I'm grateful to you, very grateful. But if you and your uncle can find your way home alone, I'd like to return and join the affair, now that I know what it's about."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" she said, and gave emphasis to the order with a stamp of a shapely, well-shod foot. "You will stay with us. Listen—my uncle is blind. One of Embrey's thugs blackjacked him so effectively that the blow blinded him. You have one eye blinded now, for the time being. There's no law in Pithole City. How would you like to be blind in both eyes?"

"Sam Van Syckle says he is going to make his own law," Mason volunteered as they resumed their walk. "And I'm committed to helping him do it."

"I wish you both a world of good luck," she said softly. "I tried desperately to find him tonight, to send him to Stonehouse Jack's to rescue you. He couldn't be found, so Uncle decided we should do it ourselves. We decided that any friend of Sam's was worth saving. He needs loyal friends, and you will both need lots of luck."

When they reached the crowded lobby of the Danforth House, Mason was no longer tired. The girl's eyes shone with a delightful sense of humor. "That one eye of yours gives you a rather sinister look, Mr. Mason," she said demurely. "There might be almost a leer in it. I hope I am mistaken."

He grinned boyishly. "Don't be too sure about that! Meantime, consider me your servant. I like the fight I seem to be engaged in. Oh, yes, I almost forgot to tell you that Johnny Steele would be pleased to know that we have met. Bless that man! His judgment of the people he told me I'd find here has been very sound."

"You know Johnny Steele? My poor cousin, Johnny?" she eagerly asked. "Good thing he went away or Ed Embrey would have had all of his money."

He explained briefly how he had met Steele, what his message to her had been. She shook her head. "He won't be happy until he is broke and back to work again in the oil fields," she predicted.

Uncle Pyranus had been listening. He reached out a thin, groping hand to Mason. "You don't happen to play checkers, do you, young man?" he inquired wistfully.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mason quickly assured him that checkers was the game he liked best. The old man smiled with pleasure. "It's one of the few things I can enjoy these dark days and nights. Susan's a willing player, but wretched!" Immediately Mason asked if he might drop in some evening for a few games. "It will be so good of you, my boy," the old man said gratefully. "Do come!"

Susan McBride smiled speculatively as she guided her uncle up the stairs. At the landing she turned and saw Mason watching them, hat in hand, a dreamy smile on his battered young face.

"I'm sure you will have a fine checker opponent, Uncle, and some good games," she predicted.

VI

FRENCH KATE, a tiny, arrogant figure, poised easily on a rangy, glistening black saddle horse, was dressed in a green velvet riding habit of perfect cut and fit. She rode easily, jauntily, insolently, her hair clasped by a black ribband, fluttering and shimmering in the afternoon sun.

Behind her, riding sedately the length of Holmden Street, trailed the painted girls of the city, over two hundred of them, dressed in their best and riding superlative horses. Men crowded to the boardwalk's edge to watch the curious parade, but it was invariably a circumspect crowd, curious, quiet and appraising. The women looked neither to the right nor left, paced their horses with care and studied elegance.

The first time Ben Mason watched this bit of elemental advertising, he was shocked to the core of his New England conscience. It was a daily rite, an oil scout informed him. Mason's attention was focused on the grace and feline beauty of French Kate. He heard a low laugh at his side.

"Looking for a bargain, Ben Mason?" a voice inquired bitingly. He turned to see Susan McBride's back melting into the crowd. His face burned. This girl seemed to have an uncanny knack of catching him in a bad position and touching him on a vulnerable spot.

Many things bothered Mason. Van Syckle had told him about the prevalence of grand larceny in the Pithole City oil fields, robbery that became almost a game, but for high and vital stakes. Further, it was condoned, commonly practiced.

"It's like this," Sam told him. "This is a young industry and it's growing too fast for its pants. There is a shortage of machinery. A man leases a property and unless he drills oil wells within a specified time, the lease is revoked and he loses a lot of money. Maybe, if he had machinery, he could drill in a gusher. He becomes a little desperate and then he takes extreme measures."

The measures, Van smilingly explained, consisted of having men and wagons watching every drilling well. If the crew left the property unguarded for a single hour, the lurking bandits moved in with dispatch and experienced skill. Within the hour, boilers and engines, drilling tools, casing, anything that could be quickly moved, would be taken, hurried to another location, assembled and put to work.

The process was something of a contest. The offending oil producers had even formed a very exclusive club known as the Forty Thieves. The members were no common rascals, nor were they bandits.

"Every one of them is a respected oil man," Van said with a chuckle. "They have money to pay for equipment, but it can't be bought. So, they 'borrow' it. There isn't a man of them who wouldn't honor an honest obligation. They enter into the spirit of this good-humored play through sheer necessity."

Mason shook his head gloomily. It was all contrary to his bringing up, his family creed.

HE WAS rapidly learning many things. He was working hard, hugely enjoying every detail of his new job. Van was a driver and he made Mason pull his weight. They were up before dawn and on the job at daylight, directing the hundred odd men engaged in digging the three-foot deep ditch the eight-mile distance to Miller Farm. Largely the men were recruited from those who had been recently discharged from the Army; they were husky, willing to work, spoiling for a good fight. Mason quickly regained his normal lean strength, got along well with the men, commanded their respect

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Each night the two would return to the Danforth House covered with mud, weary and hungry. They would bathe, change their clothes and hurry to the crowded dining room for supper. After supper, Van would usually be working on his books and records. Mason formed the habit of wandering up to the rooms occupied by Susan McBride and her uncle. The elderly man was always delighted to have him come. Susan would greet him with some reserve, usher him into her uncle's room and get out the checker game equipment. Sometimes she would stay and watch them play a little while before she was called away.

The old man's fragile, delicate fingers would lightly touch the men and he would make his moves with great deliberation while Mason patiently waited. In the intervals of waiting, he would glance through the half-open door into Susan's sitting room. He was amazed and puzzled at the number of visitors. Some he knew to be successful oil producers, a few were grim-faced men who talked in low, bitter tones. Over the rumble of their voices he could hear her calm, magically low-pitched voice. Several times he saw, to his astonishment, rolls of money pass into her hands. What was she selling? Was she engaged in some obscure form of backmail? The Colonel never mentioned the curious business conducted in the next room and Mason was too polite to mention it.

Mason would become so engrossed in his puzzlement that he would make an unwise move. When the Colonel discovered it, a slow, gentle smile of triumph would appear on the seamed face and the old man would launch the first of a series of moves that made Ben look like a tyro. He disliked this, for at home he had more than a local reputation as a checker player. The Colonel, he noted, was a master strategist. He concealed behind his gentle exterior a calculating, shrewd sense of timing.

At the end of the evening, when the last visitor in the other room had departed, Susan McBride would come in again. Sometimes she looked tired and discouraged. Again, there would be about her an air of elation. She would brew a pot of tea and the three of them would talk, mostly about the progress they were making on the pipeline. "Trust Susan McBride with any secrets we have," Van had told him. So he talked without reserve, found her well-informed, intelligent and provocative, a delightful and charming person, yet with a certain aloofness.

As the ditch neared completion, Van and Ben were forced to divide forces and responsibilities. The necessity for this became apparent and imperative. One morning when the crew returned to work, they found that during the night the teamsters had taken dump scrapers and refilled two miles of the ditch. It had been done quietly and efficiently. Bryan had scored. That day every teamster wore a broad grin when Van or Ben passed.

Van Syckle called the entire crew together. He was angry, with a cold, purposeful intensity. "Well, the fight has opened, men!" he grimly told them. "We have lost the first skirmish, but we can't afford to lose any more. I knew trouble was on its way, but I didn't think it would happen so soon. This thing can't happen again! I have pipe and machinery scheduled for delivery this week and it will have to be guarded night and day. We can't be caught asleep again. Let's do some serious planning."

The planning was simple and sensible. The force was divided in half. Van was to be in charge of the curtailed working force during the day. The balance of the men, under Mason, were to act as guards during the night, watching the machinery, patroling the long ditch.

Mason selected for his force the men who had been aching for a brush with the teamsters, men who had a good background of combat military experience. They were quickly trained, taught a series of signals, the strategy to be used in case of trouble.

Stout hickory clubs and pick handles constituted their only arms. "No guns!" Mason warned. "You can do a lot of damage with these clubs. We will never use guns unless the teamsters start it first—then we will give them a belly full. This pipe line is going to be built—that's our job."

The men entered into the spirit with enthusiasm. It was a new existence for Mason, this business of sleeping all day, working all night. But, he was young and adaptable. The atmosphere of impending danger spiced

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the long nights, made them appear shorter. He seldom saw Susan McBride or her uncle, to his regret. For a week the nights were purely routine, quiet and peaceful.

Then, one starless night, all hell broke loose.

VII

BEN HAGAN'S gross body was entirely too large for the chair he occupied in the small back room of his establishment. French Kate perched on the table, displaying a nice length of perfectly proportioned leg. Bryan sat across the table. Black, unkempt whiskers covered a face that lacked a single redeeming feature. He was puffing furiously at a foul-smelling cigar, alternating every few puffs with frequent drags from a tall glass of brandy. He scowled as Kate giggled at his obvious nervousness.

"Watcha got to grin about?" he snarled. Hagan reached a seemingly negligent hand across the small table. It closed on Bryan's throat and savagely tightened. Bryan gasped, the cigar fell in a shower of sparks and his face purpled as he struggled unsuccessfully against the pressure that was being exerted. There was a pleased look in Hagan's pig eyes, but he released his grasp and Bryan fell back, gulping air into his tortured lungs.

"Watch your lip, Bryan," Hagan said softly. "Lay off Kate! She can laugh any time she feels like it. Make one move for that little derringer of yours and I'll ram it down your throat, s'help me Gawd!"

Kate giggled, broke into a tinkling, jubilant laugh. Bryan's eyes were flinty and there was murder in his heart. But he knew that Hagan had a way of keeping his word in matters of this kind. He subsided, drank more brandy.

There was a double knock on the door. Hagan lumbered to his feet, unlocked the door. Ed Embrey came in. Embrey glanced at his companions with cynical amusement. His linen was white, his boots were gleaming, his moustache carefully tended. There was an air of confidence and ruthless authority about him. The world had been good to him, mostly because he willed it to be. He operated for the express purpose of making money, regardless of the tactics required to do it. He could be smooth and persuasive when it was necessary. He was without mercy in a business deal. He had prospered, spared no one in gaining his objectives. He had, with some minor exceptions, worked within the law, preferred it that way. But he was always prompt to take advantage of a situation that promised easy money and few risks.

"What's new?" he asked directly, after greeting Kate with unashamed and evident affection, greatly to Hagan's ill-concealed annoyance.

"Van Syckle has his men on the job, day and night," Bryan reported hoarsely, scarcely above a whisper. His throat still pained him. "Our chances for doing that damned line any damage is mighty slim."

"Have a cold, Bryan?" Embrey inquired casually.

"Ben had to massage his throat a little because he got uppity with me," Kate explained.

Embrey turned his cold eyes on Bryan, who quailed under their sudden fire and ferocity. "If I hear of you doing that again, my boy, you'll get more than a simple massage," Embrey said quietly. Bryan mumbled that he understood, sulkily remained silent.

Hagan twisted in the tight embrace of the chair. "This here Kate, she's a smart girl," he rumbled. "Think she's got the answer. If we work quick and smart we can give Van Syckle a kick in the seat of the pants he won't get over for a while. Tonight, too!"

Embrey smiled but Bryan remained immobile, expressionless. "Tell 'em, Kate, how you've foxed Van Syckle and Mason," Hagan urged, refilling his glass with brandy.

"A little sex goes a long way," French Kate said. She tossed her head, eyes fixed on Embrey. "All I had to do was to spend a few smiles and a lot of promises in the right place and to the right man."

IT WAS three hours past midnight of a warm June night. Mason sat on a log, smoking a pipe and resting. He had just completed his second tour of inspection along the route of the pipe line. Some of the pipe had already been laid. He knew that Van had critically tested every joint for tightness, had personally supervised every piece of material against possible flaws. He had driven his men hard, but he had been

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

exceedingly thorough in his personal work. The machinery, the boilers, engines and pumps, had arrived and been readied for installation in pump houses, close to Pithole City and at Cherry Run, the place where the line climbed a high hill. Two weeks more and the line would be ready for a first test. That is, if there was no further trouble from the teamsters. Mason puffed at his pipe, wondered what he would do when the job was completed. He was tired, hungry, drowsy.

He jerked to his feet when he heard two long blasts of a trumpet from the direction of the Cherry Run pump house, the agreed-upon signal of an attack. Back toward Pithole City, he heard other trumpet calls, signaling his men to rush toward the point of attack at the double-quick.

MASON whistled shrilly, yelled for the crew members in the immediate vicinity and ran blindly through the night toward the danger point, shouting encouragement as he stumbled over the rough ground.

As he neared the area from which the trumpet had sounded, he halted to gather his forces, to plan strategy. He listened carefully. An ominous silence greeted his ears and an apprehensive chill ran down his spine.

He burst into the clearing. "Clancy! Hatton!" he yelled anxiously. "What's the matter? What's happened?"

"Here I am, sir!" an excited voice answered. Clancy, followed by Hatton, emerged from the darkness. "Not a damned thing has happened, aside from the fact that some fool tooted a trumpet out in the bushes and then got to hell outa here when we investigated."

Mason swore under his breath, a most unusual performance, one resorted to only under great provocation. He had been tricked, he realized with a sickening sense of danger. Something serious was happening; but where and how were things he didn't know.

The night was quiet. Somewhere in the woods a bird twittered sleepily. Then, from the direction of Pithole City, the sky was momentarily a brilliant blaze of red. The crashing thunder of a tremendous explosion filled the air like the rolling of a gigantic drum.

VIII

BEN MASON was acutely and unhappily aware that disaster had struck savagely and shrewdly at the Van Syckle venture. The fact that undoubtedly this was his fault because he had left sections of the line unguarded, increased his anger. He swore bleakly and hopelessly as he stood in the darkness, surrounded by his pickets.

Quickly he issued orders. The men were to go back to their posts, warned to be extra alert, to pay no attention to the old signals. Someone had betrayed them, made the signals public to the enemy.

He ran to the shed back of the pump house, untied his horse, struck the startled animal sharply with his spurs and galloped recklessly through the blackness of the night toward the Number 1 pump house and in the direction of the explosion. As he met running men, he ordered them back to their posts.

His horse was lathered as he pulled him up sharply at the edge of a crowd milling around a spot a hundred yards away from the site of the pump house. It was dawn; light was leaking through crimson clouds low on the eastern horizon. Van, sketchily dressed, detached himself from the crowd, walked slowly toward him. With a minimum of words, Mason explained what had happened at his end. Van, a frown on his unshaven face, nodded absently.

"Well, I guess Bryan, Embrey & Company are really serious, Ben," he said slowly. He pointed toward the pump house. It was, Mason noted gratefully, fully intact, aside from broken windows which would not interfere with its operation.

"As near as I can make out," Van Syckle continued, "our friends made it worth while for one of our men to betray us, to give them the code signal. They used it to make us leave the pump house unguarded. What they planned to do was to blow it higher than a kite, with nitro, a new and very powerful liquid explosive they are now using to shoot oil wells. Whoever they put on the job, however, made one little mistake. A little jar is all that's needed to explode nitro. There's a hole ten feet deep where the stuff went off—and the man who carried it will always remain unidentified, because he was

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

blown to bits. We will never discover who he was, but we can be very sure that we have had a narrow escape. The man must have stumbled."

Mason nodded soberly. "Yes," he agreed huskily, "and if this was Embrey's doings, he'll try again, Van. There's a lot at stake and he won't stop now."

They repaired to the unharmed pump house, sat down wearily on a bench and discussed further strategy. So engrossed were they in their discussion that they didn't hear Susan McBride approach. She had walked softly, as was her habit. She coughed behind them and they jumped nervously to their feet. She smiled, a slow, easy smile that revealed strong, white teeth.

"I'm afraid your vigilance isn't too good," she bantered.

"They nearly got us," Van acknowledged wryly. He told how Mason had been tricked and Ben's face flushed beneath her level gaze. The thing put him in a bad light and he hated it. He wanted to stand well with this girl. Suddenly she touched his arm. "It wasn't your fault, Ben," she comforted him. He thrilled; it was the first time she had called him by his given name. He liked it.

Then, because she said she was also very tired, she sat down between them and told them some hard and bitter facts. Her colored maid, Mostella, was a sister of Hobey Sutton, the man-of-all-work at Ben Hagan's. He was a paid spy in the camp of the enemy. When things happened, he passed on that information to Mostella as quickly as possible. The man who betrayed the signal was named Hill. "Thank your friend, French Kate, for that litle job," Susan said, looking directly at Mason, with studied malice in her voice. He flushed, inwardly swore. The girl was always putting him in a bad light, apparently enjoying the process enormously. Van grinned, urged Susan to go ahead with her tale.

Hill had talked, betrayed the signal code. Bryan had brought a man from Titusville, a man who carried a gallon jug of nitro. He had been hired to explode it in the pump house at a time when it was unguarded. Then, he'd made a careless and fatal stumble, fatal for him, but not for the pump house machinery. Susan had learned what was on foot too late to warn them.

MASON got quickly to his feet. "I want to have a little talk with Hill," he gritted, his lean face weary but purposeful.

Susan chuckled. "Always aching for a fight, aren't you?" she taunted. "Well, Hill isn't here any longer. He went up to Hagan's and tried to collect the payment Kate had promised him. Hagan beat him to a pulp and loaded him into the stage for Titusville. He won't be back."

On the plea that her uncle needed attention, she left them, walked away, erect and graceful. Mason watched her, hunger in his eyes, confusion in his mind.

"Why does she have this arrangement with Hobey Sutton?" he asked.

Sam grinned maddenly. "It happens to be her business," he replied. "It's a long story, Ben. Some time I'll tell you—or maybe Susan will do it herself. Meantime, take my word for it, the girl is honest and she's playing a bigger role in a more dangerous drama than you may suspect. Right now we have other things to think about. We are going to need help. We must be on our toes, night and day. Embrey and Bryan know that the critical time isn't far away. They have no scruples. Anything can happen—and probably will. There isn't any law unless we make it ourselves. What can we do?"

Mason lighted his pipe. He leaned back, rested against the walls of the pump house. The oil fields stretched beyond his gaze far into the horizon. The roads were thick with teams; steam belched from a hundred engines, blue smoke climbed lazily into the morning sky.

"We have only one natural ally," he said quietly. "I am confident he is on our side. What do you say we enlist his aid?"

"Who's that?" Van asked anxiously, sitting up straight.

"Stonehouse Jack," Mason countered. "He isn't a sweet character by any means. But the man's real. He hates Hagan and he has no love for the rest of the gang. He loves a fight. And he knows all of the tricks of fighting, too."

Van scrambled to his feet. "By the eternal!" he cried, "I think you are right, Ben! I'll go and see him in about an hour. Meantime, if you can make that horse of yours trot a little, I'll bet you can catch up with

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Susan. That is, if you're interested. Go and get some breakfast and a little sleep. I'll see you later."

"WHAT'S the man's name?" French Kate asked thickly.

Embrey drew slowly on his cheroot, lazily expelled smoke through his nostrils in twin streams. His eyes were fastened on Kate.

"Man named Knerr," he answered casually. "Bryan picked him up in the American House bar, in Titusville. Awkward devil, it seems."

Kate shivered and paid strict attention to her glass. Hagan nodded pontifically, unhappily. "Too bad he didn't wait until he reached the pump house," he commented.

Embrey agreed. Kate was maudlin, a rare condition for her. She turned accusing eyes on Hagan. "You treated that poor boy, Hill, awful rough, Ben," she said. She started to whimper. Hagan smiled briefly, reached across the table and cuffed her with an open hand. She subsided, glared at him briefly, dropped her tangled red-gold head on folded arms and promptly went to sleep.

Embrey's eyes were ugly as he turned toward Hagan. But his voice was cool, incisive, deliberate.

"Tonight, Ben, there must be a showdown," he said. "We either win or lose tonight. Can't wait any longer. There will be work for Bryan. Here's what I have planned. . . ."

The discussion lasted nearly an hour after Bryan arrived. Kate slept through all of it. Outside the door, Hobey Sutton listened, tried to understand something that was almost beyond his ken. It frightened him, tough and primitive though he was—this was something he must tell Mostella, and at once.

OVER a hundred horses stomped impatiently and harness chains jingled in the darkness. The teams had been tied to trees for over an hour. The drivers were seated in a little clearing. They were a tough, hard-bitten lot, surly, fully aware that something big was about to happen. A few of them were drunk, noisy and argumentative.

At last Bryan strode into the clearing. He carried a flickering derrick lamp. In the light of it, he examined the faces of the men, making certain they were hands he could trust. He was calm, confident and arrogant.

He mounted a stump and began to talk. He had a certain, instinctive, persuasive ability to whip up the tempers of the men. His voice was still husky. Briefly, in simple words, he outlined the strategy to be employed. He laid special stress on the timing.

"If we fail tonight," he concluded, "the jig is up and your jobs and your income will be gone. If we win, Van Syckle is finished and the pipe line idea will be dead forever. We can win. Are you willin' to follow orders, to fight for what you want?"

The men roared their approval. The group broke up. Bryan climbed stiffly on his horse, trotted off to keep another rendezvous with another group of teamsters, three miles away.

Meanwhile the final lengths of pipe had been screwed together and ceremoniously buried. Van hadn't bothered to shave. He was weary beyond expression, yet buoyed up by a feeling that some sort of a crisis was in the immediate offing. Mason, too, was tired, although he had enjoyed a few hours of sleep. At dusk, the two men had separated. New signals had been planned, new strategy devised. Van was to share the night watch with Mason. In some of the strategy Stonehouse Jack had helped in a most cheerful manner.

The night was pitch dark. In the west, thunder clouds piled up and the sky was split with infrequent silver flashes of lightning. Mason was riding slowly along the line, talking quietly to his men. On another section, he knew Van was doing the same thing. Three miles west of Number 1 pump house there had been an abortive attempt by a dozen teamsters, a sort of a feeler, an exploratory foray. The raiders had been easily dispersed. Mason and Van were sure that another and a more serious attempt would be made before dawn. They were ready for it.

The first few drops of rain splattered down, the storm came closer and a vivid flash of lightning unexpectedly revealed a hundred teams approaching at a brisk trot,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

teamsters in the saddle, armed with clubs. Mason raised a pistol, fired twice, the agreed signal.

Mason's men wore distinguishing white arm-bands and in the first clash, in spite of the fact that they were out-numbered, handled their clubs expertly, gave a good account of themselves. There was noise and confusion among the attackers as the melee became more furious. At the height of the battle, Mason heard two shots to the east. He swore. This was to be a double attack, sound strategy under normal military tactics. Horses squealed, reared and plunged in the darkness.

Out of the darkness emerged a dozen men, indistinct through the curtain of rain. They carried very slender clubs, Mason noted as he tangled briskly with a burly teamster who handled his club expertly. The leader of the group carried a lighted derrick lamp. It was Stonehouse Jack and his great voice boomed joyfully over the din. Just as he remembered the planned strategy a club struck Mason smartly over the temple and darkness enveloped him as he fell limply in the mud.

He missed much, the end of the fight and the complete rout of the teamsters. The men with Stonehouse Jack placed the tips of their slender clubs in the flame of the derrick lamps, then all hell broke loose. Fountains of sparks, punctuated by balls of red fire spurted from the ends of the sticks. They were Roman candles and Jack's men turned them quickly on the nervous and excited horses. Without hesitation, the teams stampeded, galloped wildly through the woods, unseating their riders, trampling on teamsters fighting on foot. The crashing of the blundering horses, the cursing of the teamsters and the shouts of the victors had almost died away when Ben regained consciousness. The rain on his face was soothing. An investigation disclosed that he had a lump on the side of his head the size of a turkey egg. Also a throbbing headache.

He promptly took command. Casualties were light, mostly bruises similar to his own. "Where's Stonehouse Jack?" he asked.

"Him and his gang took off like bats outa hell as soon as the teamsters took to the woods," a man with a bloody nose answered. "Said they had another appointment with Bryan."

MASON grinned briefly. Good man, this Stonehouse Jack. He issued some orders, found his own nervous horse, leaped into the saddle and headed furiously in the direction from which the second shot had sounded. Minutes before he arrived he saw fountains of sparks, watched the arching balls of fire from Roman candles searching out men and animals and the shouting and confusion as the teams stampeded through the woods.

Van and Jack had their arms around each other and were yelling triumphantly as he arrived. No harm had been done to the line, the victory was complete, the casualties light.

"How did you know where the first attack would be?" he asked Stonehouse Jack. "If you hadn't been there just in the nick of time, we might have taken a bad whipping."

Jack chuckled, ran a hand over his close-cropped head. "Ask him," he said nodding toward the smiling Van Syckle.

"The usual channel," Sam started to say, "Susan sent word and Jack—".

Somewhere in the darkness of the woods, a shot rang out, a single vicious explosion. Mason heard the bullet strike home, saw Sam reel and drop to his knees. Stonehouse Jack kicked over the derrick lamp, left them in darkness, split by faint flashes of lightning. Van Syckle groaned. Mason was on his knees beside him and his hands were sticky with blood.

"Got me in the shoulder, Ben," Van gritted between clinched teeth. "Not serious, but disabling. This ends the fight, Ben. Do a job for me; wanted to do it myself, confound it. Hunt up Bryan. He will be in some bar. Tell him that I know he killed a man at Petroleum Center and if he isn't gone from here in an hour, the sheriff will be after him. Then give him one hell of a beating, will you, Ben? Do a nice job of it, my boy . . . wish I could see it . . . wish you luck." His voice trailed off.

There was a lump in Mason's throat as he climbed wearily to his feet.

"The damned fool, he's fainted," he said gruffly. "Jack, get him to a doctor as soon as you can. Guard him and don't let anything happen to him. I've got work to do."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

IX

HE FOUND Bryan in the long ornate bar of the Bonta House. Bryan's clothes were completely dry, but there was mud on his boots and his hat was wet. He watched Mason warily as he walked slowly through the crowd. Mason was not pretty. He was wet, plastered with mud. The lump on his temple was an ugly blue-red and throbbed with every step. News of the fight had reached the city. The crowd fell back, became silent. There was a tenseness in the air. Bryan and Mason stood alone at one section of the bar.

"A glass of brandy, please," Mason requested of the white-faced bartender. He sipped it slowly and it tasted fine. But, his eyes never left Bryan's flushed face.

Mason set the glass down carefully. He had something to say and wanted done with it. What he wanted was action. He had a debt to square.

"Bryan, someone shot Sam Van Syckle tonight. It's luck he wasn't killed." he said quietly. "You either fired that shot or one of your men did on your orders. You killed a man once, Bryan, at Petroleum Center. There's a warrant out for you, evidence enough to hang you. The sheriff will be here within the hour. Before you leave, I have a little score to settle with you." He turned to the bartender. "If there's any damage done to your place you will be paid for it," he said.

As he had turned, Bryan's right hand dove into the side pocket of his coat. Before Mason was aware of the threat, a tall gangling man, an oil producer named Riddle, jerked out a derringer and pressed it firmly against Bryan's neck.

"Pull out that pistol and lay it on the bar," he counseled shrilly. "Otherwise, I'll pull this trigger. Far's I know there's no law agin killin' a snake!" The crowd, largely oil producers voiced their approval.

Bryan swore but complied with the request. The fight was not pretty. Bryan was strong, impervious to pain. He absorbed a world of punishment, managed to strike Mason several times on the swollen temple, hard, smashing blows that made Ben weak with pain. Once, such a blow dropped him to his knees and Bryan raised a heavy boot to kick him in the face. Riddle's high voice split the silence. "Don't do that! This gun can still go off, Bryan. Fight fair, you skunk!"

Mason staggered to his feet, steeled himself to finish the fight. He fought craftily, using short punishing blows.

"Nice work, Ben!" he heard someone say. He clipped Bryan on the jaw and dropped him momentarily. He glanced up as Bryan was scrambling to his feet, swearing steadily. The voice came from Sam Van Syckle, his shoulder bandaged, a grin on his tired, unshaven face. The sight of him heartened Ben.

The end came quickly. Bryan squatted on the floor, whimpering that he had enough. Mason reached down, pulled the limp, heavy body to its feet.

"Bryan, you are going to get some more, a hell of a lot more of the same," he threatened, "unless you do one thing, right here in front of witnesses. Tell us the name of your boss. Who is behind you? Let us have the man's name—and see that you make it quick!"

Bryan lifted a battered, beaten face. He licked split and bleeding lips, trembled, coughed and hesitated.

"All right, I'll tell you," he started. "I was hired by—"

A pistol exploded on the outward fringe of the crowd. A door slammed and there was the sound of running feet. Bryan slid to the floor, an inert and awkward figure. Squarely in the middle of his low forehead was a tiny hole from which came a slow trickle of blood.

BRYAN'S death became another unsolved mystery. It was not the first murder in the city, nor the first unsolved crime. Besides, the victim had not been popular. No one saw who fired the shot. No one seemed to care much.

Three days after Bryan's death, Van Syckle, a little pale, his shoulder still bandaged, was on hand for the first test of the pipe line. It was a blazing hot day, and about twenty oil producers had gathered to witness the test. Since the death of Bryan there had been no further interference on the part of the teamsters, who now lacked leadership. The oil producers took courage from this

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

situation, felt reasonably safe in being present.

Mason was nervous, but Sam was his usual confident, exuberant self. Steam was up in the small boiler; the engine and the pump had been carefully checked. Van signaled and Mason opened a valve on the pipe leading from the big storage tank to the pump. Van personally and painfully opened the engine throttle and it burst into industrious action. The horizontal pump piston started to travel slowly back and forth. Van watched a pressure gauge; when the needle showed that oil was being pumped through the line, he nodded to Sam who grabbed a rifle from the pump house corner pointed it in the air and pulled the trigger, the signal to the Number 2 pump house at Cherry Run that pumping operations had started.

They left three armed men to guard the pump house and the rest of them mounted horses and started to trot briskly over the rough trail to Miller Farm. Mason had tried to prevent Sam from riding, but he had stubbornly insisted that he wouldn't miss this party for any number of damaged shoulders.

Three miles from the pump house, they heard two shots ring out from the Cherry Run station. Van whooped triumphantly

"The oil has reached Number 2 quicker than I thought it would," he yelled spurring his horse. "Can we beat it to Miller Farm?"

It was a wild, reckless ride. Van was a superb horsemen and seemed to enjoy it hugely. Long before they reached the clearing and the big tanks along the railroad tracks at Miller Farm, they heard three shots from that direction, the signal that the first oil had just come through.

They burst into the clearing in a cloud of dust, reined up their horses and hurried to the big discharge tank. A crowd of oil producers surrounded it. They greeted Van with cheers and a thin grin split his dusty, sweaty face as he eagerly climbed the ladder to the discharge pipe. Mason stood beside him and looked. The two-inch line was spouting oil, as much as the line could carry. The pipe line was a success.

Van removed his hat. The men crowded close to hear what he had to say. He made it brief, to the point.

"You are no longer at the mercy of the teamsters, gentlemen," he said. "I think, since Bryan's death, they realize that they are whipped.

"We still don't know who Bryan was going to name. Whoever it was, he knows the jig's up. This is the first of many pipe lines. I hope to build many more of them—and I hope you will drill the oil wells that will produce the oil to keep them filled and busy.

"I suggest that we now repair to Pithole City. I've arranged for a picnic supper and plenty of drinks to be served on the shady side of the reservoir. I hope you will join me and drink at least one toast to the success of the pipe line, and one to the confusion of all who attempt to destroy it."

The oil producers good-naturedly cheered. Horses were mounted and the return pace was leisurely. Mason rode beside Van, who was quiet, uncommunicative, almost brooding. Just before they arrived at Pithole City, he reached out and touched Mason on the shoulder.

"Ben, you have helped me over a big hump," he said quietly. "Tomorrow, I want to have a long talk with you."

Somehow, there seemed to be something ominous in his tone and Mason felt acutely uncomfortable.

Pithole City's oil producers enjoyed memorable headaches the morning after the picnic. Hundreds of toasts had been drunk; and in many of them Van Syckle had joyfully participated. He, too, had a small headache, but he didn't let it interfere with business.

Posted on the Number 1 pump house was a large sign. It stated that the pipe line was capable of pumping 800 barrels of oil every twelve hours, that it would operate twenty-four hours a day. Oil could be transported through it at a charge of only $1 a barrel, rain or shine, a fraction of what the teamsters had charged. The oil producers cheered mightily at this news and forgot their hangovers in a rush to avail themselves of the service.

LATE in the afternoon, Mason and Van rode up to the reservoir slopes, high above the city, where they might have the privacy that was denied them in the city. They tied their horses and sprawled in the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cool grass. Van Syckle, his pockets stuffed with contracts, lighted a cheroot and sat smoking it in the evening cool and peace.

He pointed toward the Pleasantville road. As far as the eye could reach, it was filled with teams and wagons, all headed away from Pithole City. The wagons were not loaded with barrels of oil; instead they were loaded with household and personal effects.

"The exodus, Ben," Van said softly. "There go several hundred men who hate me, who hate what I have done. They could still be here, earning a decent wage, rendering a useful service. But someone taught them to gouge, cheat and to use brute force to earn more money. In a way, they created the very machine that has destroyed their jobs. It isn't a good feeling to know that you have done something to throw men out of work. I don't like that feeling. If they had been honest men, I would like it less."

"In ten years, Sam, there will be a network of pipe lines wherever oil is found," Mason predicted. "Because you have found a way to transport oil cheaply, Sam, you will encourage drilling and the refining of crude oil. The hundreds of teamsters you have thrown out of work will be lost in the hundreds of thousands who, as a result of the pioneer work you have done, will have steady employment."

Van nodded absently. He was silent for several minutes; from below came the familiar rumble of wagons, the usual turmoil of an oil field; the rumbling roar of bullwheels spinning fast, the squeak of walking beams nodding in the early dusk, the sound of sledges on drilling bits, the tenor clatter of sandreels dropping bailers, the thin, erratic traces of music from the town, the echo of a woman's hysterical laughter, the bark of a dog.

"From now on, Ben, building and operating a pipe line will be about as exciting as cutting hay and hauling it into your ancestral barn up in New Hampshire," Van Syckle said regretfully. "Most of the fun will be gone. There will be no more fights, only a few challenges."

He slowly rolled a fresh cheroot between a trouser leg and his one useful hand. He scratched a match and lighted it and the smoke curled up in slender blue threads from his lips.

He looked directly at Ben Mason.

"Ben, after tomorrow, you're fired," he coolly informed him.

MASON stiffened, felt a flush creeping over his face. He was puzzled and frankly said so. "You've been more than decent to me, Sam. I appreciate it more than I can tell. But I'm worried. Have I failed in some way?" he asked anxiously.

Van Syckle chuckled. "That queer Yankee conscience bothering you, Ben?" he asked. Then, serious, "It's just like I told you. Our little war with the teamsters is over. From now on, pipe line building will be pretty tame.

"I have other plans for you. Listen and see if you can't go along with me. I think I told you once that I have plenty of money. Maybe I have more than is good for me but I have a lot of fun making and spending money.

"Right now, I have some money invested in a share in an oil property, a wildcat well that is to be drilled at Ball Town, about four miles from here. I'm going to be pretty busy from now on with my pipe line, too busy to pay much attention to this well. I need someone to protect my interest, and I'd rather have you on the job than anyone I know. This time, you can't work openly for me. In fact, there must be no visible connection between us. What I want you to do is to get a job as a tool dresser on this well and keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. What do you say? So far, you haven't learned a darned thing about the practical side of oil well drilling. The work will be hard, but there's a lot you can learn. Is it a deal?"

Mason considered the proposal for a few minutes. He did want to learn more about the oil business. He gripped Van's hand. He was to go the next day, Van told him, to the offices of the Big Treasure Oil Company at Ball Town and ask for a job as tool dresser. "Their regular tool dresser is quitting tonight," Van assured him with a wide grin. "They will need a man badly. Don't worry about your lack of experience. There aren't many who have had any experience in the oil industry. Besides, man power is at a premium."

There was something in his tone that

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mason found just a little puzzling. "Look," he questioned, "is all this something to do with Embrey? Is it something that Susan McBride has a hand in? Surely you can trust me by this time—tell me all about it."

Van slowly shook his head. "Sorry, Ben," he said apologetically, "but I happen to be a sort of a co-owner of certain secrets and I can't divulge them without the consent of the other people who are concerned. Let me say this: it may have something to do with Embrey; it may have something to do with Susan."

Further than that he wouldn't go. He remained stubbornly silent under a barrage of questions from Mason. Finally Ben's temper got the better of him. "Damn it," he snorted, "why can't Susan live peacefully, instead of poking her pretty nose into a lot of things that shouldn't concern a girl?"

"Are you sure certain things don't concern her?" inquired Van Syckle. "For all you know, perhaps she is just as anxious as you are to live quietly and peacefully. Right now she needs friends who don't ask too many questions. I warn you, she has a very hot and violent temper."

"How do you know?" Mason asked hotly.

"Well—" and Van got to his feet, stretched lazily and walked toward his tethered horse. "I do know. Matter of fact, I know her sister pretty well. She's a year older than Susan, prettier, too. She has a pretty violent temper, so I think it's a family trait. You see, Ben, I happen to be married to Susan's sister. She will join me within a month. We are expecting an addition to the Van Syckle family any day now."

X

BEN MASON wasn't entirely happy as a tool dresser. He had moved from the comfortable quarters he had shared with Van Syckle in the Danforth House. He was now quartered in the garret room of a farm house owned by one Enos Bateman, and he shared a lumpy bed with the driller, Hood McGee, a dour, untalkative individual who subscribed to a stern and unswerving belief that his tool dresser should perform most of the heavy physical work attached to the drilling of a well.

Mason had learned a lot. He came to be familiar with such terms as headache post, pitman, sand reel, jars, bull wheels, sand lines and all of the other strange and curious jargon of the oil fields. The hours were long, twelve toil-filled hours a day. He was a good pupil, however, and earned the grudging praise of McGee at times.

The food served at the Bateman table was atrocious. McGee, who seemed blessed with a cast-iron stomach, complained bitterly and at length.

"If I set me down to another mess of half-fried sow belly and soggy potatoes, I'm afraid I can't stand it no more," he was wont to say. But, these items appeared with monotonous regularity; they either ate what was put on their table or in the dinner pails or went hungry.

The only bright spot in the dreary round of routine work was Mercury. Mercury was a gaunt and somewhat elderly horse that browsed in the clearing where the derrick stood. Mason had named him, and the horse had belonged to the man who owned the Big Treasure Oil Company. Went lame on the man, Bateman explained. The owner turned the horse loose, suggested that Bateman shoot the horse. Bateman, a shiftless, lazy individual, had not the heart to shoot the creature but he never fed it. It existed on the meager grazing on the scrubby farm.

Mason's life on a New England farm, his cavalry, above all his inate hate of waste, caused him to make friends with the horse. He liked animals. Mercury had a wild eye and a deep suspicion of all men. His temper was most uncertain. Mason swore when he examined the animal's sides. They had been cruelly spurred and the wounds were still open. He secured some salve, applied it to the wounds and narrowly escaped being kicked for his kindness. But the wounds healed. He bought oats and corn from Bateman, paying that grasping individual twice their value. Mercury ate the provender voraciously and took on weight. He became very fond of Mason, followed him to and from the derrick. When he hungered greatly, he would come close to the derrick, neigh forlornly and canter stiffly around the derrick, begging for attention.

One Saturday night Mason borrowed a bridle from Bateman and rode Mercury into town. The horse was badly gaited but will-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing. As Mason rode off, McGee, rocking furiously in the only serviceable rocking chair the Batemans owned, remarked that Mercury and Mason made a pretty good pair.

SUSAN appeared pleased to see him, but not visibly over-joyed, to his secret annoyance. The Colonel, however, was pathetically glad to welcome him. Mason inquired about Van's health and well-being. Susan smiled prettily, said that Sam was a busy man, engaged in another pipe line venture. The teamsters had caused no further trouble. In addition, the telegraph had brought word that Sam was now the father of a baby boy.

"Your sister is well, I hope?" Mason asked politely. Susan flushed and it pleased Ben to note that he had momentarily upset her habitual calm.

"Sam must have told you," she accused. "Yes, Sally is fine, expects to be here within a month. She's the pretty one of the family."

"I will reserve a decision on that point until I can see her," Mason said gallantly.

"Well, maybe your judgment has improved, for all I know," she replied, a devil dancing in her eyes. "I seem to remember a time, however, when it wasn't so good. Remember French Kate?"

Drat the girl, always tormenting him! Before he could frame a suitable answer, Mostella announced a visitor. Susan left him with a disarming smile and a swish of skirts. He heard a man's voice in the other room, anxious and gruff. Then the Colonel broke in: "My boy it's been a long time since I've been pitted against you in a game of checkers. I'm anxious to see if your game has improved. While we are playing, you can tell me about your new work."

Mason played badly, was roundly beaten. At the end of the evening, he realized that Pyranus Potter had asked many pointed and leading questions about the well being drilled on the Bateman farm. He was almost annoyed at the gentle old man's persistent questions, but could not find it in his heart to be angry with him.

Susan went to the door with him when he left, an unusual honor. She had been busy, as usual, all evening. At least a dozen men had come to the other room. She looked very tired and there were circles under her fine eyes. Mason said directly, "Susan, what in the world are you doing? Whatever it is, it isn't work for a girl. Why don't you stop?"

She smiled, and her usual bantering manner was gone. She laid a hand lightly on his arm. Her voice was low. "Ben, I can't quit! I can't tell you about it now. Some day you will know all about it. Meantime, would you be interested in knowing that you are playing an important part in something that will come to a climax one of these days, not too far in the future? Will you trust me and promise not to ask any more questions?"

A wave of warmth and happiness swept over him. He reached out blindly to take her in his arms. There was much he wanted to say and this seemed an appropriate time to do it. His arms clutched thin air and he heard her giggle.

"I'm coming, Uncle Pyranus," she called. "Good-night, Ben."

He could have sworn that Pyranus Potter had not called. It was just a ruse, an excuse to leave him. It had worked, he admitted ruefully.

Nevertheless, he whistled as he went down the stairs. In the kitchen of the Danforth House he bribed the cook to make him a dozen beef and ham sandwiches, to get him a half-dozen bottles of beer from the ice box.

WITH the filled basket on his arm, he mounted Mercury and trotted up Holmden Street, out and up the dusty road that led to Ball Town.

"Women are funny, Mercury," he confided. Mercury, being a wise animal, didn't answer.

McGee was asleep, snoring as usual. Mason wakened him and the two of them shared the sandwiches and cool beer. McGee thawed under Mason's thoughtfulness and the influence of a filled stomach.

"Gawd, Ben," he said, wiping his unkempt mustache with the back of a hand, "them was the best vittles I've et in three weeks, and the beer was grand."

They slept soundly, serene in the knowledge that the next day was Sunday and a day of rest.

Hood McGee leaned negligently against the headache post and casually fanned out

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the temper screw. He chomped intently on a heavy bite of Spearhead eating tobacco, and his eyes were angry and bitter.

"Ben," he asked, "you been paid any wages yet from this here Big Treasure Oil Company? Me, I ain't got a cent! Got me a little advance when the man hired me at Shamburg. Ain't seen the man since. Them Batemans is gettin' real anxious about gettin' some board money from us. I'm strapped."

Ben explained that he had not received any wages, either. He had noted the visibly growing coolness on the part of the Batemans. It annoyed him to think of owing money. Back home, the idea of not owing money was almost a family creed, a religion.

"I been in that room they call an office," McGee confessed, "and asked that pimply-faced clerk for some wages and all he did was grin and say it would be along some of these days. I got a little rough with him and kinda chocked and cuffed him around for a few minutes, kinda gentle like. Seems he ain't been paid no wages either. I don't like the looks of things, do you?"

Ben Mason didn't. He sat on the forge billows and counted up his slender resources. He had enough to meet their joint board bill and to pay for another week. He told McGee that he would pay the bill. Hood nearly swallowed his cud of tobacco in his gratitude and his old eyes steamed up. To save him embarrassment, Ben walked out to the boiler, which really didn't need attention at all.

According to McGee, they should reach the pay sand the following Thursday. That would probably bring the owner and the missing wages. Ben pessimistically opened his dinner pail, found a wedge of apple pie, one of the many culinary errors committed by Mrs. Bateman. Gingerly he carried it over to the expectant and waiting Mercury, who took a tentative nibble, and, disillusioned, let the pie fall to the ground. He turned a reproachful eye on Mason.

"Mercury," he chuckled, "some day you may be hungry enough to appreciate a piece of this durable pastry." He fished in his pocket, brought out a handful of oats which the old horse ate with appetite and a decided lack of manners.

McGee yelled from the derrick floor that it was time to pull out the tools and Mason trotted back to give him a hand.

That week they started to have visitors. They seemed anxious, worried, expectant. They asked questions. How deep was the well? When would they reach the pay sand depth? And indications of oil? Where would the second well be located?

Inquiry developed that the visitors were share owners in the venture. The promoter didn't show up. One night, after the well had been shut down, McGee started to do some figuring on the back of an old envelope. He reached a total, whistled deeply.

"Migawd, Ben, know what I just figured out?" Mason didn't, so McGee told him. "Near as I can tell, if these people have told the truth, that blasted promoter sold about fifty one-sixteenth shares in his well," he announced dolefully. "We're knee-deep in a swindle, Ben, even if we are innocent."

Mason was troubled. "What can we do, Hood?" he asked anxiously.

McGee was glum. "We ain't got much choice, I guess. One thing, we'd better keep our mouths shut when the share owners come around. If we shut down, we ain't got no chance of gettin' our wages. If we strike a rich pay sand, the owners, even if they was swindled, will have to untangle their rights and they should oughta be inclined to pay us what we have comin'."

McGee's reasoning seemed sound. On Thursday, the derrick was surrounded by nearly fifty expectant owners. By this time, they had discovered that they had been victimized and were very unhappy about it. Their only chance was that the well would become a rich producer or a gusher.

After every screw, when the boiler was dumped, one or more of the waiting owners would rush over, grab a handful of the sand pumpings, anxiously smell of it, examine it for traces of oil. It was sniffed, even tasted.

At sundown, McGee confessed to Mason that they had already drilled twenty feet below where the pay sand should be.

"She's gonna be a duster, dry as a popcorn belch," he admited gloomily. "Might as well pass out the bad news."

He walked to the edge of the derrick floor. "I hate like hell to do this," he said gruffly, "but the well's a duster, no mistake about it. Me and Mason has been hooked

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the same as you. We ain't been paid no wages whatsoever."

The crowd was silent. A short, stubby man came forward. "The only thing we can do, folks, is to seize the tools, machinery and lumber, sell it, and then figure out some way of dividing it equally," he advised.

McGee and Mason knew there would be only a few dollars to be divided among the lot. Besides, it would take time. They couldn't afford to wait. They grimly informed the crowd that they would waive their rights.

Up in the attic room they silently and gloomily packed their belongings. McGee, being an experienced driller, was confident that he could easily secure a job in the Pithole City oil fields. One of the shareholders had offered him a ride back into the city. The men shook hands. "Soon as I get me a job, Ben, I'll pay you back what I owe you," he promised.

Mason came down stairs with a small bundle of clothes. He talked with the Batemans. The man who had leased the farm, Enos Bateman said, was a well-dressed man, kinda dark, a good talker, smoked cheroots. He had never seen him again from the day he had driven the stake for the location of the well.

Mason slammed the door behind him, started to walk across the yard in the darkness. He heard steps and heavy breathing behind him. It was Mercury, begging for something to eat. Mason was tired and puzzled. He patted Mercury's nose and wondered for the hundredth time why Van Syckle had sent him out here, why Sam had never visited the site of the well.

Absently he bridled Mercury, mounted him and rode slowly and reflectively toward Pithole City. He would see Susan and Sam Van Syckle just as soon as he could. As he entered the outskirts of the town, he suddenly realized that he wasn't going back to the Bateman farm, that he was riding a horse that didn't belong to him.

XI

MASON told his story to Van, Susan and Pyranus Potter. They listened attentively, gravely. Van nodded from time to time as Mason told the story down to the end. Susan asked a few searching questions.

"The pattern is clear," Sam said reflectively, drawing deeply on his cheroot. "Same thing has happened dozens of times. Same little investors, getting a kick in the seat of the pants at the show-down.

"Always the same story! A persuasive salesman sells them a one-sixteenth share in a wildcat venture, collects the money and departs. No one ever hears of him again. Usually the well is drilled where there isn't a remote chance of striking oil. I bought my share from the widow of a man who worked for me when I first got here. I knew she had been swindled and I took her share for what she had paid for it. I suspected what would happen, but I wanted to be sure. That's why you were out there, Ben, to see how it worked out."

Pyranus Potter's voice was incisive, more so than Ben had ever heard it before. "It all bears the typical Embrey mark," he charged. "Trouble is, we can't prove it. Trust him to play it safe. Thousands of people have been skinned by this scheme."

Susan listened, thinking intently, a frown on her brow. She got to her feet, walked over and laid an affectionate hand on Van Syckle's shoulder.

"Isn't it about time for the final curtain, Sam?" she asked. "Everything is ready. I'm so tired of waiting, so weary of planning. What do you think?"

Van stood looking out of the window. For a minute he was silent. Then he walked back to the little group, his hand in Susan's. "Yes, I guess the time is ripe," he admitted. "Within six months or a year, Pithole City will be no more. We still don't know much about oil wells. They don't always flow. New fields will have to be opened, a lot of wildcat wells drilled. Some day there will be other Pitholes. But when that happens, they will have to be decent, law-abiding places, places where men can do business without fear of being swindled, a place where men can turn to the law for security."

He stood in front of Mason, his feet apart. A smile flicked across his round face. "Ben, it seems you are the chosen instrument," he said solemnly. "You seem to thrive on danger and excitement. You are honest. Maybe you're too darned honest for

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

your own good in this imperfect world. But we have tremendous confidence in you. Everything will depend on you. It won't be easy, but it won't be dull."

He chuckled. "You know, Ben," he predicted, "I'll bet you haven't the slightest idea of what's ahead of you! How would it feel to have $20,000 cash money in your jeans? How would you like to be an oil producer? Do you think our Susan would make a good waitress?"

Mason stared at him in amazement. Had Sam gone off his head? He turned to Susan. She was smiling. Uncle Pyranus' face was like that of a prophet, one who had glimpsed the Promised Land and found it good. Van shook Ben's hand, volunteered no further information, left the room. Susan went with him.

"Now, young man, let's talk business," said Pyranus Potter. "You have been a soldier, you should know how to take orders, to obey them to the letter and without question. You have courage, that's been proved. I want you to prove that you can obey orders in spite of hell and high water. Are you willing to listen?"

Mason nodded. There was a new note of authority in the old man's voice, an assurance and a confidence that was compelling. Phil Sheridan had that sort of voice. Mason remembered hearing him plan a strategic, daring raid in just that tone.

"Yessir!" he said simply. "Tell me about it."

PLAY was running high at the poker table in Stonehouse Jack's place. Mason cradled his cards carefully. Across from him, Stonehouse Jack was calmly watching. Mason felt sweat uncomfortably trickle down the back of his neck. The center of the table was piled high with gold and greenbacks.

"How many cards?" Jack inquired huskily. Mason peeked at his cards again. He had played poker in the Army. He had a pair of sevens, the six, eight and nine of diamonds. Jack had opened. Mason's natural card sense told him that he should hold the small pair and draw three cards. But—and he twisted uneasily in his chair—he was under orders to do just exactly the opposite.

"Make up your mind, my friend!" Jack said. A bystander laughed.

Mason reluctantly threw away the pair of sevens. "Two cards," he gulped. Jack's supple hands flipped out the cards. Slowly, Mason spread the cards in his big hand, felt a glow of excitement. He had drawn the seven and ten of diamonds, giving him a straight flush, an almost unbeatable combination. That was the hell with orders, he reflected fiercely. Obey them and things usually turned out all right.

Stonehouse Jack had not drawn any cards. "I like these well enough to add a hundred dollars to the pot," he said softly and deliberately dribbled a shower of bills to the table.

"Piddling money!" Mason charged arrogantly. In the background, Sam Van Syckle chuckled softly. "I'll raise you $500!" The crowd grew silent. As the betting proceeded, Jack remained cool, almost indifferent. Mason was drenched with sweat, in an agony of suspense.

HE TOSSED his last bill on the table. "Well, what have you got?" he asked. Stonehouse Jack spread four aces on the table and grinned. The crowd buzzed with excitement as he reached for the pot.

"Just a minute!" Mason cried. "Four aces are not enough. Feast your eyes on these!" The straight flush was spread and the crowd cackled like a flock of chickens. Stonehouse Jack grinned, reached across the table and shook Mason's hand.

"I'd rather have your luck than a license to steal," he grinned and there was a suspicion of a wink as he said it.

Mason counted the pot, stuffed the money in his pockets. He had been told this would happen; nevertheless, his emotions were difficult to control. There was more he had to do.

"Everyone to the bar!" he yelled. "The drinks are on me, the best in the house."

The crowd flocked to the bar. Mason suddenly realized that French Kate was beside him, looking up at him with wide eyes, a provocative smile, pressing close. He was not surprised. This, again, was something scheduled to happen.

"You are lucky at cards, Ben," she said, "very lucky! I would be willing to bet that

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you'd be equally lucky at love. Would you care to try your luck?"

He grinned, raised his glass. "I expect to be very lucky at love," he boasted.

She pressed closer. "Let's leave here," she whispered.

He shook his head. "Another round for everyone," he ordered. When it was served, he raised his glass. "I hope all of you will drink a toast to my continued good luck," he invited. "I've won $23,000 tonight, just enough to enable me to drill a well at Enterprise. I've got a good location and enough information to convince me that the well will be a gusher. Wish me luck, men!" They downed their drinks, extended rough and rowdy good wishes.

Then he walked slowly down Holmden Street with French Kate. She clung closely and possessively to his arm. "Here's how I know I can't miss on my well," he was explaining. "Years before Drake drilled the first oil well, Old Man Goggan, at Enterprise, started to dig a water well on his farm. Down around fifty feet he found some water. When he tried to deepen the well, he struck something that spoiled the water, made it greasy. That was oil! The old man didn't know it. He died a month back and I heard about it from his widow. I've leased the whole farm and some of the farms around it. Good drillers tell me that I can't miss; should strike oil at about 700 feet, they tell me."

"Ben, your luck is a miracle," Kate murmured. "I'm sure it would be just as good at love. In fact I can guarantee it." She pressed closer to him, her face upturned invitingly. She was especially lovely; her tiny figure was encased in yellow linen, laced with black, a gown that displayed white, smooth shoulders and emphasized the perfection of her body.

"This is not the time to press my luck," Mason said cautiously, remembering instructions. "Some other time, Kate. Goodnight, I'll see you again, I'm sure. Then we can talk over this matter of luck then. It should be an interesting exploration."

She turned abruptly and left him, her high heels clattering noisily on the plank walk, her tiny nose in the air, her eyes hot with indignation.

"Damn him, damn him, damn him!" she repeated endlessly as she marched stormily up the street.

XII

FOLLOWING orders blindly often became confusing, even in Enterprise, Ben Mason discovered. Winning the money from Stonehouse Jack had been a planned affair. It had been done with Jack's connivance and cooperation. The money Jack had lost had been supplied by Susan McBride and her uncle, to provide an explanation for the money Mason was using in his operations. The toast had been rehearsed, as had the things he told French Kate. These were all part of Susan's plans. She was by turns frank and then maddingly reticent.

He was committed to the drilling of a well on the Goggan farm, the lease was in his name, the operation, on the surface, wholly his. He lived in a boarding house conducted by the Widow Goggan. Susan McBride, as Sam had hinted, was working there as a waitress, a tall, capable girl in gingham who had a way of handling the rough oil field workers.

Uncle Pyranus was staying at the Eagle House in Pleasantville, four miles away. Every few nights Mason mounted Mercury, now fat and lazy, and rode up there to report to him. Sometimes Susan sent a note. Once she had even ridden Mercury up the long hill to Pleasantville and the old horse had cantered off proudly.

The next evening she cornered Mason. There was a lurking devil in her eyes. "That stolen steed of yours is a terrible saddle horse," she taunted.

"I didn't steal him," Ben protested vigorously. "The Big Treasure Oil Company owed me wages and the horse was the only asset left, so I took him. Do you call that stealing?"

Her eyes were wide and demure. "What else could you call it, Ben? After all, he's almost a valuable horse. You were owed three week's wages. Horses, even as old as Mercury, are easily worth $400 in the oil fields. Your wages amounted to only $60. I'd call it stealing, but perhaps a justified theft, should we say?"

Mason was horrified at what she said. Back home, the stealing of a horse was con-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sidered a social crime, practically the equivalent of matricide. To accuse a man of being a horse thief was the greatest of insults; to be proven one was the ultimate in social degradation.

She chuckled at his obvious confusion, added fire to it. "Lots of people in the oil fields have stolen horses, Ben. That's why the owners usually have their horses branded. Just like they do in the West. Ever notice that little brand on Mercury's left hip?"

Mason had. It was a small circle, with a bar.

"Any idea whose brand that is?" she asked bluntly. He hadn't and said as much. "It happens to be the private brand of Ed Embrey!" she giggled. "I hear he has a similar brand on French Kate. Would you know anything about that?"

He blushed deeply, to her apparent enjoyment. "May the Lord have mercy on you if Embrey ever finds out you have stolen a horse from him," she warned.

He shivered. This seemed to be a light, casual matter to this laughing, bantering girl. But, to him, it was serious. She heckled him constantly about stealing the horse and the matter became an abrasive on a conscience already sensitive. He owed Embrey approximately $340. He was almost broke. The thought of returning the horse to Embrey was repulsive. He remembered the cruel spur marks. Besides, he had become fond of the animal. While the Enterprise field was new, Embrey might appear any day, see Mercury and try to secure possession of his property. Mason soberly weighed the probable consequences. There was, he decided, only one answer.

That night he wrote a letter to his father. He had just compounded the felony, he bitterly realized, as he blotted the letter. To horse stealing, he had added the sin of lying, all of which added to his mental discomfort.

He explained in his letter that he had an opportunity to make an investment in the oil industry, one with great possibilities of rich returns. If his father could lend him $350, he would sign over his interest in the south sixty. He needed the money in a hurry if he was to take advantage of the situation.

As he sealed the letter, he reflected that perhaps he had not lied too much. After all, if he could pay the money to Embrey, it would be a good investment—an investment in peace of mind, in freedom from the nagging of Susan McBride.

That night he slept more soundly than had been his wont of late.

THE driller's name was Jake Spence. He had a face like a full moon and false teeth that threatened to fall out whenever he spoke—which was often. He had an uncertain temper, a shifty eye. But he knew his trade. He was a good driller, a hard task-master.

The drilling well was located within a hundred feet of the old Goggan barn. Mason had suggested that he could use the barn to shelter Mercury. Spence's anger was almost visible.

"You keep the hell outa that barn unless the Colonel gives you permission!" he snarled. Mason bristled, hungered to plant a fist in the fat face. Perhaps, he reflected, this was another part of the mysterious strategy. That night when he had ridden to Pleasantville, the Colonel confirmed it.

"Keep away from the barn," he advised coolly. "Spence was right. Susan should have told you. How is she?"

Mason explained briefly that Susan seemed in abundant health and good spirits. Potter smiled gently. "She's a brave girl, a gallant spirit, Ben," he said softly. "She likes to tease you, I know. But I happen to know that Susan never teases anyone she doesn't like. She even teases me, bless her heart."

Riding back that night through a late November snowstorm, Mason glowed as he recalled the Colonel's words. Susan was a most confusing person. Sometimes he thought he knew her well; again, he was afraid he would never know her. He did know, however, that he loved her deeply, in spite of the fact that there were times when he wanted to spank her.

Take the matter of apple pie, for example. He was very fond of apple pie. Hers—for she did part of the cooking at the Goggan establishment—with one regrettable exception, were notable. Her pies, however, reeked with cinnamon, a spice he abhorred.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Back home, his women folk used nutmeg, for which he had a very special fondness. He mentioned this to her one day and she snorted angrily. "Another Yankee notion!" she gibed. "Wonder what those relatives of yours would say if they knew you'd stolen a horse?"

The next day he found an extra-large piece of apple pie in his dinner pail and bit into it hopefully, only to discover that it was heavily and lavishly flavored with cinnamon. He gave the pie to Jake Spence, who wolfed it down gratefully having no preferences whatsoever as to flavoring.

That night, at supper, he noted that the other men were served with large pieces of what looked like a very satisfactory cherry pie. At his place was a small wedge of apple pie. He looked up. At the other end of the dining room, Susan McBride stood, looking at him challengingly, her arms akimbo, a slight smile appearing on her flushed attractive face.

He was grateful that the piece was small, for he realized that he must eat it. He chewed the first bite with the air of a martyr. Then he suddenly realized that here, indeed, was an authentic apple pie, fittingly flavored with nutmeg. He looked up again at Susan. This time her face was wholly guileless and demure.

After supper he awkwardly thanked her for the pie, advancing a doubtful theory that perhaps he might have a second piece. She hotly denied serving a pie with nutmeg in it and tartly suggested that he probably couldn't tell the difference anyway. A man who couldn't tell if a horse belonged to him or not, couldn't expect to be a judge of an apple pie, she crisply informed him.

You never could tell about her. There was the day when he had awkwardly let a walking beam pitman fall on his fingers. She had expertly cleaned and bandaged the hurt. He went white under the bite of the raw turpentine she poured on the bandage. She looked at him soberly, suddenly put both warm hands on his face and kissed him roundly on the lips. The next day, when he tried to embrace her in the privacy of the kitchen, she eluded him, smacked his face with a wet dishcloth. His ears burned as he remembered her mocking laughter as he backed hastily out of the kitchen door.

XIII

EMBREY, dressed in austere black, lounged comfortably in his chair. He patted Kate's hand possessively, ignored Hagan's glare. The room was quiet. There had been a second disastrous fire in Pithole City, people were leaving, looking for a new boom oil town. Business in the saloons, the gambling houses, was poor. Hagan had been complaining about it. He had voiced his determination to move to where there would be better pickings.

"You had better stay right here," Embrey advised. "You know they have some law in Petroleum Center, Cash Up and Enterprise. Lots of people don't like you, Ben, and they might welcome a chance to make things unpleasant for you elsewhere."

Kate twirled a liquor glass between her small white hands, slanted her eyes at Embrey. "What about the information I brought you about Mason?" she asked anxiously.

Embrey rolled a fresh cheroot, lighted it deliberately, expelled the smoke from his nostrils. He examined the tip critically. "It may be valuable," he admitted cautiously. "Can't tell. If Mason told the truth, the chances are that he will drill in a gusher. So far, my scouts tell me that only a few small wells have been drilled in the Enterprise field. They are watching Mason's well carefully. The man obviously knows nothing about wells or what they are worth. If his well comes in good, I'll be on the job in a hurry and buy him out so quick it will make his head swim. I'll have cash, too. If I get the bargain that seems probable, I expect to become a respectable oil man. I'll risk all that I have on the venture, make a final gamble. Then I'd like to settle down, travel a little, enjoy life and be amused."

Hagan grunted. Deep in his heart he hated Embrey, but the man had been generous, had paid him well. He resented, most of all, Embrey's talk of a settled future. Especially, he didn't like the appraising way in which Embrey looked at Kate as he talked of the future.

"Don't forget," he warned, "that if this thing goes through, you gotta thank me and Kate for gettin' the dope for you. We've earned us a share, ain't we?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Embrey stubbed out his cheroot, walked slowly toward the door. "Yes," he said insolently, "I'll not forget, Ben. Especially, I'll not forget Kate. Don't forget that it was she who brought me the information." He paused, lighted a fresh cheroot. "Rest assured I'll see that Kate is fully rewarded."

WEDNESDAY was a cold, blustery day. There were six inches of snow on the ground and the wind had been searching, whistling hungrily and chillingly around the derrick. Mason and Spence had worked through a long hard day. The boiler, exposed to the wind, ate up a lot of boiler wood, required constant attention.

When Mason returned to the boarding house, he found two letters on the floor of his room. One was a curt note from Susan. She had taken Mercury and ridden to the Eagle House for an important meeting with her uncle, she had written. She would return late, but when she came it was imperative that she see him for a few minutes, so would he please stay awake and wait for her.

The other envelope was thick and important in appearance. It bore a familiar postmark and the handwriting was that of his father. He read the short, almost curt note in some dismay. Suddenly, he realized how strong his appeal for $350 must have been, how eloquently he must have painted this thing he had called an investment.

"We are deeply moved by your letter," his father had written. "Daily we read of the fortunes being made in this strange business of oil wells. In family council we decided that it would be idle and wicked to send you only the small sum you requested. Between us, we have enlarged the sum to one of some substance. We trust entirely to your business sense. Invest it wisely, and God be with you."

His face burned with shame. The draft was for $6,000.

Ben Mason was acutely unhappy, nervous and worried. His people, the good, wholesome, honest people of his family, had placed a great trust in him; they had given him every cent they had laboriously saved through the years. On that money they expected the enhancement he had so glowingly outlined in his letter. The more a man deceived, the deeper he got, he thought bitterly. He felt very lonesome, very disturbed, wished mightily that he might confide in someone. Perhaps he would tell Susan when she returned. She might understand.

It was late. He looked from his window; snow was swirling down in white clouds, driven by a blustery wind that howled dolefully around the Goggan house. The road from Pleasantville was rough and the incline was steep in many places. Mercury, usually a sure-footed animal, might stumble and throw Susan. She might be out there in the snow, slowly freezing, hurt and alone. He paced the room restlessly, tormented with fears, nervous as a cat.

He went downstairs. It might be a good idea to go out to the shed and put some extra straw in Mercury's stall, a little extra feed of oats in the feed box. He hoped Susan would blanket the horse when she arrived. As he opened the kitchen door, he heard voices in the shed. Susan had arrived; he had not heard her because of the storm. He heard her voice; another, to his astonishment, was the voice of Jake Spence. There was a third voice, one with which he was not familiar. He recognized, as he reached the stable wall, that Susan was issuing orders, that they were being accepted by Spence and the unknown man.

The stable door opened suddenly and Mason flattened himself against the wall. Three forms emerged. Susan and Spence disappeared in the house. The stranger walked off in the storm.

Mason ducked in the stable door, heard a welcoming nicker from Mercury. He scratched a match. In its flickering light, he noted that Mercury was deeply bedded, covered with a blanket, contentedly munching a generous feed of oats. The horse had been rubbed down, was almost dry. Susan McBride, he thought proudly, knew how to take care of a horse. He patted Mercury's head.

"Well, old boy, from now on, you belong to me," he confided. "I've gotten into a peck of trouble because of you, but I've got the money to pay for you."

He returned to the quiet boarding house, tip-toed upstairs to wait for Susan McBride. There was a timid knock on his door. Quickly he opened it. Susan stood there, clad in a heavy blue dressing gown, her face still glowing from the snow and wind. Her

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

eyes were dancing. "Come down to the kitchen," she whispered. "We have a lot to talk about."

She stoked the fire, brewed a pot of coffee. Ben sat, waiting for her to start.

"Mostly, what I have to pass on to you, are orders from Uncle Pyranus. There is much I want to tell you, Ben, but it will have to wait. I've had a long talk with uncle. Here's what he wants you to do. . . ."

THREE cups of coffee later he was still listening, trying to make logic out of what an excited, eager Susan was saying. None of it made sense to him. Yet she did draw a perfect blueprint of his behavior for the next two days, a pattern which he must follow closely in what he said, what he did. Offhand, it sounded silly to him.

"Uncle said you might revolt," she whispered. "He said I was to remind you that he is your commanding officer, that you promised to obey orders without question."

He nodded drearily and crossly. "Right!" he said starchily. "I will remember. After all, I guess I'm only a private in this war and I have no right to think or to ask questions. Good night, *sir!*"

He stood up, did a very military about-face, marched smartly and loudly out of the room and up stairs.

Susan wearily climbed the stairs to her own small room, crawled into bed. "Why," she asked the darkness, "why do I have to hurt Ben so often?" There was no answer, but presently fatigue exacted its toll and she fell into a deep sleep.

Mason was angry and sleepless. Toward morning he peered out of the frosted window. It had stopped snowing. From the window he could see the derrick etched bleakly against the star-dotted sky. The barn loomed dark and bulky against the white snow. He was almost certain he could see a light shining between the cracks. He shivered in the cold air, returned to bed and the grateful warmth of the blankets.

XIV

HE HAD steam up in the boiler when Jake Spence appeared in the morning. That was part of his job; it meant getting up and reaching the drilling well an hour before Jake did. The heat of the boiler was good and he hated to leave it. There was a small fire in the forge; and the derrick stove, made of a length of boiler smokestack, glowed redly and belched sparks and flame. Jake was strangely cheerful as the tools were run in. He aimed a speculative eye at the string on the cable that marked the depth to which the drill had penetrated.

"We should reach the pay sand tomorrow," he predicted.

The day was uncomfortable, filled with endless work. There were many bits to be dressed, the boiler required frequent stoking and Mason was kept jumping. Along the fence beside the road, a man lingered, a saddle horse on a tether beside him.

"Scut of an oil scout!" Jake informed Ben. "Some oil producer or speculator has hired him to watch and report if we have a show of oil. Then the skunk will ride to the telegraph and pass the news on to his boss. The boss will pick up a satchel of money and some blank lease forms and come out here, hell-for-leather, and lease up everything in sight. That's how them fellers make money. Sounds a lot easier than bein' a damned fool driller in this here weather."

The scout departed as Mason and Spence left the derrick at dusk. He must have been pretty well chilled, Mason thought, standing there all day, watching every move made.

The beef stew that night was hot and succulent. Mason accepted the seconds that Susan McBride pressed upon him, reached for more potatoes and a helping of baked beans. His appetite was robust. He was on his third cup of coffee by the time the room had quieted down.

"Well, we will reach the pay sand tomorrow morning." he remarked a little loudly. Minutes after Mason's remark, a man at the far end of the room quietly left. Mason strained his ears, heard the soft thunder of hooves as someone rode furiously into the night. Susan McBride, across the table, picked up a platter, flicked an amused eye at Mason and clattered into the kitchen.

The next morning was crisp and penetratingly cold. As Mason arrived at the well, the oil scout again appeared. He rode slowly up and down the road, however, until Spence waded through the snow to the derrick and drilling operations started.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

After the third screw, Spence left the derrick floor, walked out toward the engine. He stopped, pulled out a red bandana handkerchief and ostentatiously wiped his forehead. Mason chuckled, wondered if Jake was sweating in the frigid atmosphere. He never gave a thought to the possibility of his action being a signal.

The bailer dropped, with a shrill screech of the sand reel. The little engine spurted steam as the bailer was hauled upward. Leaning on the lever, Spence's face split with a grin and his teeth almost dropped out. "Might get a showin' this time," he said tensely.

The long cylinder shot from the casing; Spence eased on the lever, held the bailer stationary as Mason pushed it into a keg, where some of its contents could be saved. Sure enough, there was a heavy, greasy scum on the surface of the dumpings. Mason felt a thrill of excitement. During the next screw, Spence stopped the engine, leaned over the casing head and sniffed mightily. "Man, I smell me oil!" he exclaimed.

Quickly he fanned out the balance of the screw and they pulled the tools from the hole. Again the bailer dropped. When it emerged, it seemed filled with oil. The bailer was dumped and the black scum spread slowly over the snow. Spence nodded. "What did I tell you?" he asked.

The man with the horse showed immediate attention, tied his horse, climbed the fence and started toward the drilling rig. Spence swore, left the derrick, walked toward the man with a heavy hammer in his hand, swearing heartily and loudly. The man stopped, grinned, walked back to his horse. He stood on the fence, waved his arms. Before Spence had returned to the derrick, another scout, well-mounted, had appeared and joined the first.

Spence took command, worked quickly and expertly. "Put out the forge and stove fires, Ben," he ordered. "Also, carry some water out to the boiler. We may strike a vein of gas and have to douse the fire fast as hell to keep away from an explosion. From now on, dump the bailer in the stock tank. Let's save all of the oil we can. Let's not let those blasted scouts know how much we are bailin' out."

Within the hour, the level of the tank was close to the top. The scouts watched expectantly. They conferred, then as a team, they started walking toward the derrick.

"Come on, Ben, trouble's brewing!" Spence warned. "We musn't let them spies know how much oil we bailed out. Sock 'em hard and often!"

The encounter was brief and almost pointless. The two scouts separated. Spence lunged at his man, who sidestepped him, cuffed him smartly on the jaw. Spence's teeth popped out into the snow. When he stooped to pick them up, the scout skillfully planted a foot on his rear end and ran toward the derrick.

Mason's man let him approach. He was a boxer, alert, watching every move. The two men fought silently, without damaging each other. Meantime, the other scout reached the derrick floor, looked into the tank, estimated its contents and was running back toward the road. He put his fingers to his mouth, whistled shrilly. He passed Spence, still searching for his teeth, on the dead run. His body crashed into Mason, spilling him in the snow. As he got slowly to his feet, he saw the scouts riding off. They waved their hands mockingly.

Spence came limping back to the derrick. He stuffed his upper plate into place with a greasy hand and spat disgustedly.

Mason, remembering his orders, said, "Well, that's all for today, Jake. Let's call it a day. And keep your mouth shut."

As he walked toward the boarding house he felt a sense of elation, a feeling that this was a prelude to a final curtain.

"THERE'S a man in the dining room who wants to see you," Mrs. Goggan's shrill voice announced at the door of Mason's bedroom.

It was afternoon and the boarding house was quiet. Most of the boarders were at work. Jake was snoring in his room as Mason came downstairs. Susan McBride waited for him. She twisted her apron, looked at him closely. "Ben, you *will* remember, won't you?" she asked anxiously, her voice trembling a little.

He straightened his shoulders, reached out, touched her cheek lightly. "Don't worry, Susan, I'm still the good soldier," he assured her.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The dining room was empty, with one notable exception. Ed Embrey sat with his back to the kitchen door, waiting for him. He was his usual, calm, assured self, dressed in his habitual somber black. There was a clatter of dishes from the kitchen and Mason heard Mrs. Goggan's voice raised, smelled ham cooking, heard the rattle of a stove lid.

Embrey was lighting a cheroot, doing it with steady hands, looking at Mason with a studied smile. "Well, we meet again," he said quietly. "Had a slight difficulty the first time, as I recall it, Mason. This time, let's meet on a different ground, one of business. I hear you've drilled in your well. I have some idle money and the Pithole field is about exhausted. I'm in a position to make an investment and I'll pay you a very decent price for your venture just as it stands. What do you say?"

Mason ignored the outstretched hand, sat down, casually lighted his pipe. "One screw in the sand and this well looks very good to me," he said, talking slowly as he had been told to do. "I've got the whole farm under lease, options on most of the surrounding farms. If my well is good, the whole area is good. What have you got to offer? There will be other offers, you know."

Embrey smiled thinly. There was truth in what Mason said. There would be other offers, *fair* offers, too. He made an offer, after studying for a minute. Looking past him Mason saw Susan standing in the kitchen door, tense and excited. She half-waved, turned to say something to someone he couldn't see.

"Embrey, your offer is rejected! It isn't anywhere near fair," he heard himself saying firmly. "Let's stop fooling. Give me your best offer and let it be quick, make it a final, leave-or-take proposition."

Embrey shifted uneasily in his chair. Mason was proving to be tougher than he had anticipated. He weighed and appraised all of the factors involved. He remembered what the scouts had reported. They were sound men. They had reported a tremendous potential volume of oil on the basis of their findings.

"How about $200,000?" he questioned eagerly.

"If it's in cash, I'll accept," Mason agreed.

Embrey reached down, lifted a leather satchel, opened it and slowly counted out the money, pushed it across the table. Mason produced his lease, signed it over to Embrey, called for Mrs. Goggan to witness his signature, pushed the papers across to Embrey, gathered in the mountain of greenbacks.

Embrey smiled. As he got to his feet, there emerged from the kitchen a curious procession. Sam Van Syckle appeared, Pyranus Potter on his arm. There was Susan McBride and a man Mason didn't know. Embrey surveyed them arrogantly.

"If you are planning on buying Mason's property, Van Syckle, you're late, very late," he sneered. "I've just bought it, bought it for a fraction of its real value."

Van chuckled, deftly guided Colonel Potter to a chair. He grinned across at Embrey. "Paper's all signed, money all passed hands?" he inquired. Mason and Embrey both nodded.

Van tossed back his head and roared in sudden laughter. "Embrey, you've tricked a lot of people in your life. You have been pretty rotten and legal in your career of swindling," he said. "This time, you are the victim! Tell him, Uncle Pyranus, just what has happened and why it happened."

The old man sat straight, his dark glasses staring sightlessly across at Embrey. He was smiling, his gentle smile, and he seemed at peace with the world. Susan McBride stood back of his chair, her hands clasped tightly on its back.

The old man didn't raise his voice. "I don't suppose you even remember me, Embrey," he began in his soft voice, "but I was one of your victims. Because I objected to being swindled, threatened to have the law on you, you had me blackjacked. That's why I wear these." A fragile hand lightly touched the dark glasses, and the old man paused momentarily.

"Eventually, Embrey, the people you swindled got together, decided that you should be punished, brought to justice. Susan and I worked for over a year, hunting up your victims, getting them to unite on a plan. We finally decided on a scheme and we were able to finance it, put it into operation, thanks to Ben Mason.

"You have just bought a property, bought it with your eyes wide open, no questions asked. You thought you were swindling

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ben Mason, buying a fortune for a song. How like you! You put into this purchase every cent you have.

"Every drop of oil bailed from that well was piped to it from tanks hidden in the old barn!"

The old man paused, reached up and patted Susan's hand and smiled broadly. "When word gets around of how neatly you were fooled, the great and shrewd Ed Embrey victimized, all inside the law, your name will be mud in the oil fields."

His voice became stern, inflexible. "Understand, Embrey?"

Embrey's calm was broken, shattered. He started to curse, but Van Syckle placed a big hand over his mouth and one on his throat, choked him off.

Van picked up the money in front of Mason, thrust it in his pocket. "This will be divided among the people you swindled, Embrey, if that's any consolation to you."

Susan was a frozen image, watching Mason. He was shocked beyond speech. He realized that he had been a feckless fool in the hands of these shrewd and adroit schemers. He had been a party, a very prominent party, to a swindle of major proportions. He didn't like it. It was contrary to his Yankee bringing up. Susan's face was blank. Van was smiling, humming a little tune. The stranger stood aloof, his face calm, his eyes intent.

Embrey was mumbling dejectedly. He slumped in his seat, the transfer papers in front of him, a bitter twist to his mouth.

SUDDENLY Mason arrived at a decision. He spoke, looking only at Embrey. "I am almost innocent of this affair," he confessed huskily. "I don't like it! I'll tell you what I will do. I have a draft here for $6,000. I'll give it to you for your lease. It's all I have. I think you're a crook, but I can't bring myself to doing you in the eye. I'll trade that draft for a worthless lease and a dry hole on one condition. By accident, it seems I stole a horse from you once. Throw in that horse, the one you left at the Bateman farm, and we can still make a deal. But I feel sure you were the man behind the Big Treasure Oil Company that owed me wages they never paid."

Embrey straightened in his chair, grinned in relief, reached for the pen and ink. He signed the transfer of the lease to Mason, blotted it carefully, pocketed the draft and got to his feet.

"Mason, you're the worst sucker I ever knew," he said. "A conscience like yours has no place in the oil fields. That horse is my last dividend from the Big Treasure Oil Company, thanks to you."

The stranger stepped forward, laid a restraining hand on Embrey's shoulder, said impassively: "My name is Tinker. I'm Sheriff of Warren County. Been wanting to get you in this county for a long time, Mr. Embrey! A lot of our people were swindled in the Big Treasure Oil Company, never knew who promoted it. You've just admitted your guilt. You are coming with me, Embrey."

He took a firm grip on Embrey's arm and marched him out. Mason gathered up his papers, stuffed them in his pocket and glared at the little group.

"Well," he said bitterly, "I hope you like the final curtain, all of you. Especially you, Susan! You've made a fool of me. I've just made a worse fool of myself. I hope you are satisfied."

In the face of their protests, he turned his back on them, walked out of the room, out of doors. Atkins and Embrey were riding away; Embrey riding ahead, the sheriff following with a pistol in his gloved hand.

"Ben, what's happened? What happened to Ed?" a familiar and anxious voice asked. He turned. French Kate, heavily furred, her red-gold hair concealed under a hood, stood beside her saddle horse.

"Ed told me this was the show-down," she whimpered. "He said we would go away and be happy and rich. Ben, what has happened? Is Ed arrested? Why wouldn't he talk to me?"

Mason scuffed the snow with a boot. "He got in the way of a Yankee conscience, I guess, Kate," he said gently. "You won't see him again for a long, long time. I suggest that you go back to Hagan. He appreciates you. Remember, I told you once that I was going to be lucky in love? Well, I was wrong, dead wrong. I've just lost, Kate."

He stared bleakly out across the snow. Atkins and Embrey were almost out of

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sight. He turned, trudged slowly toward the drilling well, not looking back.

XV

MASON found himself thinking clearly. He had tossed away six thousand hard-earned Yankee dollars to appease a Yankee conscience. It didn't make sense.

He deliberately gathered up his work clothes. He looked around, made a sensible, practical appraisal of the property. All this was now his. The junk value of the drilling equipment would partially cover what he had paid to Embrey, he concluded. He glanced toward the boiler. The gauge registered 50 pounds. Wasted fuel! Cordwood at $10 a cord and a good cord of it left! It was *his* money now that was being burned.

He put down his load of personal belongings. Now was the time to begin to practice Yankee traits of frugality. He managed to lower the drilling tools to the bottom of the hole. As he tried to adjust the temper screw, he coolly estimated that the oil in the stock tank would be worth something when he started to salvage what was left.

He jerked the engine telegraph line, started to drill. Jake had taught him the rudiments of the art. He'd use up that steam, even if there was no sense in drilling deeper. He relaxed on the drilling stool, paid out screw in a most professional manner. Maybe he could get a job as a driller, earn enough to pay back that debt to his people.

Across the snowy field he saw a flash of red. He sat up straighter. That would be Susan McBride. She was running toward the derrick. He was glad she was coming, but he hoped that she would not plague or tease him.

She swung effortlessly to the derrick floor, stood there, her breath a little short, looking him straight in the eye. Her voice, when she started to talk, could scarcely be heard above the slap of the heavy cable in the casing throat, the rattle and puffing of the engine. He climbed down and came close to her. He was no longer tired.

"I've been a beast, Ben," she admitted breathlessly. "But Uncle Pyranus lost most of his money—and then he was blinded. Many other people were badly hurt, too, Ben. I had to help them. We had to have someone like you do the things you did. It wasn't swindling, Ben! My uncle's share will make it possible for him to have an operation that may restore his sight. It will help some widows to live in comfort in their old age. It will help other people to get back what they lost. . . . But, Ben, I'm proud of you and the stand you took today. Even if you haven't got a cent, I want you if you will have me. That's a shameless confession, isn't it? I'm tired of being subtle, of plotting. I want to live a life of quiet and peace, and I'd like to live it with you."

He reached out blindly, gathered her close to him. This moment erased every vestige of the misery he had suffered.

"Besides," Susan McBride was saying softly as he cradled her warmly in his arms, "I'll never tease you again—that is very much. And I'll give you apple pie with a world of your blessed nutmeg in it."

They were interrupted by an impolite and considerable hissing behind them. They jumped apart and turned. The hissing came from the casing head. Susan alone realized what it meant. "That's gas, Ben!" she cried. "Turn the temper screw fast!"

He obeyed, the drill probed deeper, the hissing grew in volume. She motioned for him to shut down the engine and the walking beam creaked to a stop. In the silence they heard the hissing change to a soft bubbling sound far down the casing, a sound that grew louder and nearer.

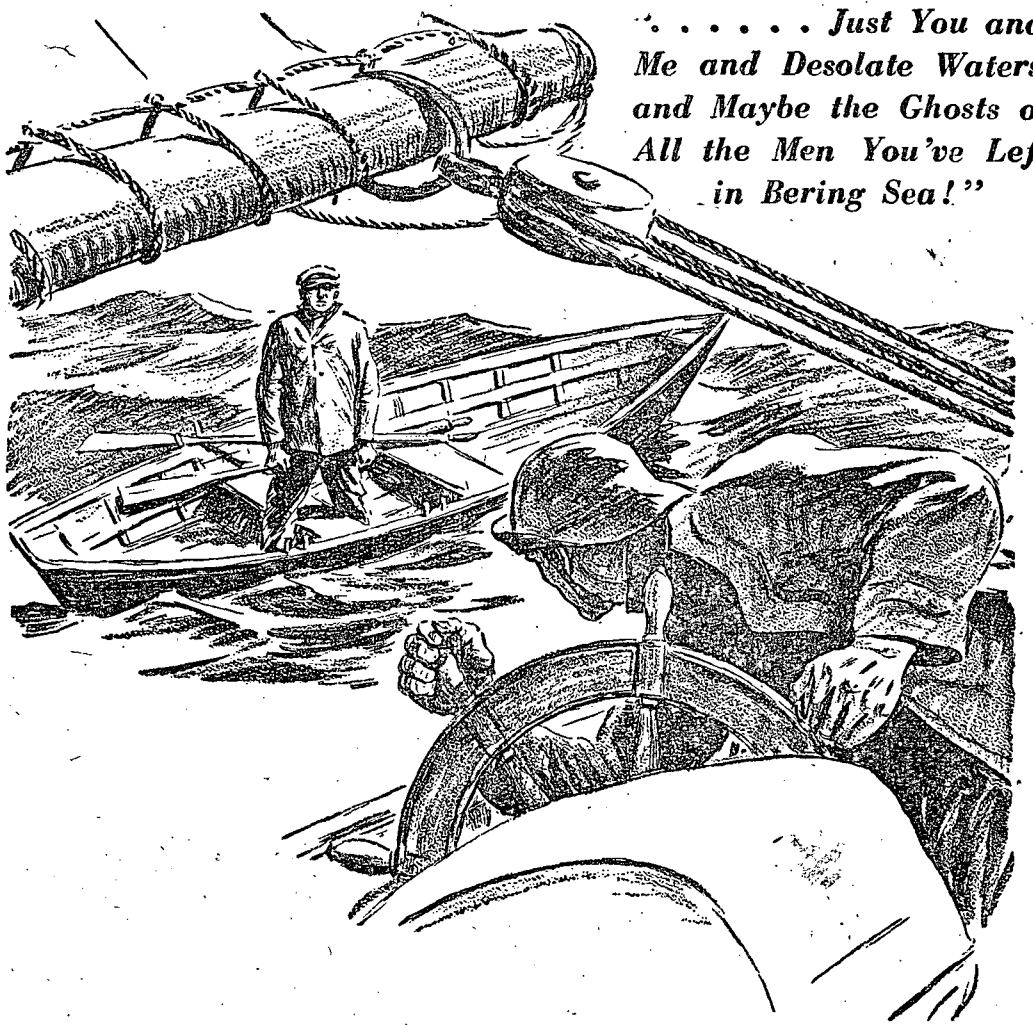
"Ben Mason, I'm afraid you've struck a flowing well, thanks to your blessed Yankee conscience!" she said, trying to make her voice heard above the increasing rush of noise. "We won't have to live on a driller's wages, after all. Spence stopped drilling just above the oil sand—and you've tapped it!"

The oil reached the casing head, slopped lazily and musically over the iron lips and ran sluggishly down the hill, making a broad black streak in the snow.

There would be men in Enterprise who would know how to cap the well, to control its flow until stock tanks could be installed.

They left the derrick, hand-in-hand, walked slowly through the snow. They were silent. And deeply happy.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



". . . . . Just You and Me and Desolate Waters, and Maybe the Ghosts of All the Men You've Left in Bering Sea!"

BERING SEA GHOST

By ROBERT E. PINKERTON

TERRY McADAMS slammed the door against the gale and brushed the rain out of his eyes. In a year the place hadn't changed. Kerosene lamps over the bar were as sooty, Helga of the thick waist and heavy arms was swirling her glass in a pool of spilled liquor, and Sid Cole, who'd still look like a hawk if he were in a pulpit, was nervously arranging glasses.

Everything was the same, even the sou'-easter whooping down Puget Sound. Terry remembered how Helga coaxed him to buy one more drink. He'd bought, and Sid Cole slipped in the drops. Next night Terry wakened in the *Laura* off Flattery, and that fall when the schooner returned he'd been lost in an open boat and left for dead in Bering Sea. Scores of seal hunters had been lost in fog and gale up there and luck alone got a man out. Terry'd had it, and now he'd come back, a ghost to Helga and Sid, and to Captain Nick Shand.

Helga turned and saw Terry at the door. Her shriek sounded above the gale and, still shrieking, she ran through a rear door. Sid Cole looked up, and was motionless.

"What ails Helga?" Terry asked.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He made it a taunt but he had nothing against the crimp. If a man was fool enough to drink in such a joint he couldn't hold ill will, and Terry was only amused when Sid Cole poured a big slug and downed it while glancing with apprehension toward a small room. Terry walked to it. A man sat at a table, a half empty bottle before him.

"Keep Helga quiet," he said.

He didn't look up until Terry pulled out a chair and sat down, and Terry had to hand it to Nick Shand. The owner and skipper of the *Laura* was half drunk, and suddenly he was cold sober. Beyond that, his face and eyes revealed nothing, not even recognition. The face was round and full but with no sign of softness. The eyes only repeated that here was a hard man. More than ever, Terry McAdams was convinced Shand had deliberately left him knowing he would perish.

Terry stared back. He'd waited eight months for this and he wasn't going to be hurried. He knew Shand too well. The man's hardness was matched by strength and ruthlessness. The *Laura* was top sealing schooner in the port. She'd never had a bad season. Shand wouldn't know how to take defeat, and if Terry's return entailed it, Shand was already planning to make it a victory. Terry understood this, and suddenly smiling, he took Shand's glass and poured it full.

"This is safer'n the last drink I had in Sid's place," he said. "Forgetting that? You paid fifty dollars for it."

He began mockingly but ended with a harsh note. Seeing Shand again brought back those eight days adrift in a dory with constant gales and fog. He and Al Thacker, his boat puller, had no food, little water. They were soaked with icy spray and after the third day they knew they had no chance. When Thacker died and Terry was starved and frozen and hopeless, he thought how, if he lived, he'd kill Shand. Or nearly kill him, let him live with defeat.

"You drunk that day or just forget us?" Terry asked, hoping to sting Shand into a betraying rage or look. "We came in at two o'clock with a boatload. Twenty seals. I smelled fog and when we went out again I told you we'd go straight down wind. We didn't get more'n four miles. Could see the schooner's sails just before fog came. You could 'a' seen us when we topped a wave. The lousiest skipper in the fleet would 'a' had an easy time picking us up, but you didn't come close enough for us to hear the gun."

Shand's stare gave no hint of how he was taking this.

"Bring a glass" he called, and when Sid Cole came he added, "Shut the door." After he'd drowned a drink he said, "Well?"

"So you can talk!" Terry said harshly. "Keep on! Tell why you didn't find us. Maybe you didn't want to—for some reason."

Even that didn't stir Shand. His hard eyes remained steady.

"Was it because you hated my guts?" Terry demanded. "You never could bully me like you did the other hunters. Or knock me down. You didn't like to think any man was as good as you are. Or was it my money you wanted? I was high hunter in the *Laura* with two hundred seventeen skins. That's eight hundred and sixty-eight dollars. Al Thacker had a hundred and eight dollars and fifty cents due on skins and seventy-nine in wages. I'm taking it to his mother in Port Ludlow tomorrow."

"It's owed to Al, not her," Shand said.

The heartlessness of that lifted Terry from his chair.

"I'd like to see you adrift in a boat, watching a man die when you was too far gone to lift a finger!" he said. "And so help me, Shand, I will."

Shand shrugged. "Sealin's a man's game," he said.

"Then why you in it? A man worth the name would 'a' found us. Losing a boat that's in plain sight—what'll hunters think?"

"Meanin' you'll tell 'em?"

"What's to stop me?"

NICK SHAND poured a drink. It was the first break in his calm, not the drink but the studied manner of his pouring it.

"You got gall!" he said savagely, shoving his face close. "Maybe you was high hunter but there's none in the fleet worse to keep track of. Start out nor'east and after dark I find you thirty miles to the nor'west. Jeff Carcot told me you drove him crazy in the *Comet*. When you get lost it's your own fault."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Characteristically, Shand was attacking, but Terry jeered.

"How many seals in boats easy to pick up?" he said. "That's why you shanghai top hunters. They go roamin' around, any place they can kill. They're hunting, not figuring to make it easy for a drunk skipper. But this ain't getting me my money, Shand."

"Supposin' you'd come back in the *Laura,*" Shand said, and a faint change in his manner puzzled Terry. "You'd 'a' spent your money in a month. Ain't got the sense to figure sealin' won't last. But I'm figurin'. Next winter I'll have two schooners. Pay for the second in a season. I'm gettin' mine, and keepin' it, before the government shuts us down. But where'll you be then? On the beach. Lettin' Sid Cole or some other crimp put you in a square-rigger bound around the Horn."

Shand swept out an arm, knocking the bottle to the floor.

"You louse of a Pribilof bull!" he said with a snarl. "Know why I had Sid get you last year? I heard you had a nose for seal and you showed it. In the Gulf you said, 'Try fifty miles sou'west,' and we land smack in the middle of the herd. Same in Bering. That's why I wanted you aboard. Figured if you was that good you could go mate this season and skipper the *Laura* next year."

The brazen unexpectedness of this jolted Terry but he knew Shand and his methods and was on guard. He met the statement with a shrug and a glance of contempt, but he was alert and excited. He'd wanted to get in the *Laura* again but was sure Shand wouldn't take him. So he'd planned only to come back and give Shand a beating that would hold the *Laura* in port for a season, maybe forever. It would be a job. Shand was as tough as the oak bitts in his schooner, but all Terry wanted was an even break. He wouldn't fight Shand here, where Sid Cole would rush in a couple of his bullies, or Shand could kick a leg off a table and start swinging. He wanted to catch the fellow alone. Now, with a chance to get in the *Laura,* a new plan began to form.

"Hunting, I make double what you pay a mate," he said.

"I'll pay enough," Shand said. "And you can use the stern boat and get yourself some skins."

Terry shrugged his indifference but had a smile for himself. Shand might have strength, but he was unaccustomed to this sort of thing. He had betrayed eagerness to get Terry into the *Laura,* and that business of the stern boat showed what he intended. This time, Shand would figure, when he left Terry adrift in Bering Sea he'd leave him forever.

"And next season you'll make plenty with your share from the *Laura,*" Shand said.

Terry laughed outright. Shand was making a fist of this. He was desperate to get Terry out to the sealing grounds when Terry wanted nothing better than to go. The plan was forming up quickly, and it was good. Shand, as master of a vessel on the high seas, would have all the advantage, but Terry would spot him that.

"All right," he said suddenly. "Only we start square."

"Your money's in the new schooner with mine. All I could scrape together. She's a beauty. I saw her today, in frame."

"You'd go through a dead man's pockets, Shand."

"Leave it there and it'll get you a piece of her. Three sixty-fourths."

Terry didn't press the point, and he didn't believe there was a new schooner. Shand was right about one thing—Terry would have spent his money long ago if he'd had it. And if he had it now he'd pay it to the last cent to get in the *Laura.*

"Only you don't go through Al Thacker's pockets," Terry said. "I saw him die, and he told me a lot about his mother."

"You shippin' as mate or ain't you?"

"After I get back from Port Ludlow."

Shand pulled out a wad of bills and counted $187.50.

"Tell Al's old lady I'm sorry about him," he said.

This time Terry's face was shoved across the table.

"I don't lie to anybody for you, Shand!" he said. "And when I'm mate, the *Laura* doesn't leave a hunter adrift in Bering. You ought to have a taste of that once."

"You always were too soft," Shand said.

THE *Laura* sailed two days later. She carried eleven hunters and twelve foremast hands who'd serve as boat pullers.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Terry McAdams, late getting back from Port Ludlow, saw only a few stagger aboard. He heard some had been carried and dumped into their bunks. Captain Nick Shand took the schooner into Juan de Fuca Strait at midnight and turned her over to his new mate.

"Crowd her," he said. "Whole fleet's behind us, even the Canucks. I want first crack at the herd."

Terry didn't speak. He'd been in the shipyards, knew Shand was not building a new schooner. When they got to Bering Sea and Terry went hunting, Shand would sail away again, and the lightning of luck never struck twice in those waters. That's what Shand thought. Shand would eliminate the only man who had ever crossed or defied him. Terry smiled as he stood at the wheel in the darkness.

Before supper the next night, hunters began to crawl out, heavy-headed, cursing. Terry, going below to eat, found many old shipmates. They'd thought him dead and stared in amazement, but Briggs Asher was the only one who spoke.

"Walkin' aboard and cheatin' Sid Cole out o' fifty bucks!" he said.

Shand's fist slammed across the table and met the last word. It kept right on, knocking out a tooth. Asher pulled the tooth loose and examined it.

"I'm sayin' it again, Shand," he said.

All of Nick Shand went across the table this time, crowding, smashing. Terry could not down a feeling of admiration for the skipper's swift aggression. Shand stood alone against eleven hunters, and those sailing out of Port Townsend were the hardest in the sealing fleet. He didn't bother to fall back on his power as master of a ship or on the law of the high seas. Shand felt he was power and law in himself.

After supper Shand told Terry to keep thirty miles off the Vancouver Island coast. "Ought to pick up the herd about Clayoquot Sound," he said, and went below.

Terry knew the captain would shut himself in his cabin and stay comfortably drunk until they found the seals. Shand was capable of spending tremendous energy but he never wasted it. Terry had watched him a year ago, crowding it on, often at the wheel for twenty hours straight, but with no seals in sight he'd relax with a bottle. Terry'd handled the *Laura* many such times, and standing a night watch provides time for thinking.

Before dark, Briggs Asher came up, face cut and swollen.

"What happened to you?" he asked Terry.

"Luck," Terry said. "Day after the puller died, when I couldn't lift an oar, the boat drifted to the Pribilofs. Gunboat was just leaving for the Sandwich Islands."

"To hell with how you got out. Why you back in the *Laura* doin' Shand's dirty work?"

"I'm doing nobody's dirty work."

"You're mate in a schooner with four hunters loaded aboard by Sid Cole, me among 'em. You and Helga!"

Asher, in the *Laura* last season, was a good hunter, and a stubborn, pugnacious fellow who never sidestepped trouble. Terry thought him rather dumb.

"You could have stayed out of Sid's place," Terry said.

Asher grinned. "I get too drunk too quick," he said. "Sid got me for Shand last January, too."

"You damned fool! Have a good hunt to the south?"

"Beat the fleet down to Monterey and had the seals three days before another sail showed. Shand's a sealer."

"I just got back," Terry said. "Haven't heard anything. How many boats Shand lose this spring?"

"He never lost one yet off California. Keeps sober, drives hard, all the way to Flattery. Way I figure it, the strain gets him. 'Bout August, up in Bering, he starts drinkin'. Last year he lost you and three more."

"Three!" Terry said. "That was two years ago."

"After you there was Lazard, Solter and Egan. All in the last week. It's like I said. He cracks. Gets drunk."

A COLD wind came down off the snow of the Olympics astern, and when Terry shivered it wasn't from the wind. He was certain Shand had deliberately abandoned him, but thought it was because he'd stood up to the skipper, because Shand had found a man he couldn't cow.

This was wholly different. Lazard, Sol-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ter, Egan and he were the *Laura's* top hunters, driving for seals regardless. All had two hundred skins or better. There'd been worse fog and wind in July, and Shand had picked up every boat. Until the last week! Five thousand dollars rode in those four boats, and with hunters and pullers dead it had remained in Shand's pockets.

Through the night Terry went over and over this new angle. Hunters and their pullers were lost every season and any man who went into the North Pacific for seals could expect it. Some skippers lost four or five boats, and Terry knew them as drunks, careless or incompetent. No one had ever hinted or dreamed a sealing captain would deliberately abandon men. Now everything added up, and on one side.

When Shand came on deck next morning, Terry saw him as a stranger, wondered what sort could rate human lives at a few hundred dollars. And he understood for the first time that on this voyage Shand was planning to leave not only Terry but Asher and the three others who'd been shanghaied. Again Terry went over the plan he'd formed. It had to be good, and sure.

NEXT day the *Laura* was among the seals, on their gigantic swing up the North American coast. Eleven boats went overside, fanned out, soon dropped below the horizon. In the afternoon Terry watched Shand. The man was alert, efficient. He knew where all the boats were, kept crowding after them, noting wind shifts and compass courses. Two hours after dark he had picked up the last of the hunters, running them down swiftly and accurately. Shand, with his skill and energy, Terry thought bitterly, could never have an excuse for losing a boat.

The *Laura* still had the herd to herself the second day, and then a hundred schooners from San Francisco, Port Townsend and Victoria began sifting through the millions of swimming animals. From early January into April the quarry and the white winged hawks had moved north from Monterery, and now, after the schooners had cleared holds and taken on supplies in Juan de Fuca Strait, the hunt would go on until the seals had reached sanctuary on the rocky beaches of the Pribilofs.

Terry hunted with the stern boat the second day, a young seaman, Billy Forbes, his puller. He had no fear here. Vancouver Island and the whole coast to Cape Spencer in Alaska offered too many safe harbors for Shand to leave him. Shand would wait for the broad reaches and fogs and gales of Bering Sea. Terry killed six seals. The puller was green, spoiled several shots, but he learned quickly. That night the *Laura's* decks were red and greasy from the skinning.

In the night a sou'easter came. It blew three days, blew the *Laura* two hundred miles off shore. She beat back, and a second gale took her to sea again. Not until late May did she find seals off Prince of Wales Island in Alaska, but the storms had scattered the herd and few were taken. Bad weather continued. Hunters remained in the cabin, cursing, and Shand's temper was worse than theirs. For the first time the skipper faced failure.

"Out six weeks and less'n four hundred skins!" he said to Terry. "Why don't you smell 'em like last year?"

His tone was nasty and Terry didn't answer.

"Hunters say we got a Jonah," Shand said. "Say it's you. Say you had no right to get out last year, being that you were marked for dead."

The callousness of this stung Terry.

"I was as good as dead, Shand!" he said. "In a boat with a dead man. Tell 'em they never were lost. You never was. Tell 'em none of you know anything about it. Let 'em say to me I'm a Jonah. I'll tell 'em I am. I'm telling you I am."

Shand's hard eyes stared. "You talk like one," he said.

Terry got hold of himself. Shand liked this Jonah talk. The hunters were superstitious, and a Jonah would account for things they couldn't explain. As they saw it, the only thing to do with a Jonah was get rid of him.

"If you ain't one, where's the seals?" Shand demanded.

That was better. Bering Sea was part of his plan and now Terry might hasten it.

"Somebody told you the seals follow the hundred-fathom curve," he said. "You believed it. But did you follow the curve? You've been three hundred miles off."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"How could we keep on it in such weather?"

"Don't seals get blowed around too? Maybe they're tired of it. If I was a seal, I'd say, 'To hell with this.' "

SHAND looked at Terry with suspicion. "So you been talkin' to 'em," he said. "Like a Jonah might. What they tell you?"

"What a smart skipper'd expect. They're fed up. Hitting for Bering. Scattered all over the Gulf of Alaska." Terry chuckled. "Ain't a skipper in the fleet smart enough to know it. Wait till I'm captain of the *Laura*. I'll show you dumb ones."

"I hit a mate as hard as a foremast hand," Shand said.

"Any time you want to try out that notion."

Shand went below, and still Terry chuckled. The skipper'd be looking at charts and studying on whether there was any sense in what he'd been told. And the glass was dropping, another gale coming. There'd be no finding seals while they were outside of Bering Sea.

The gale struck, and another. Hunters scowled at Terry when he entered the cabin. The first of June the *Laura* had taken only five hundred skins and hunters said openly that Terry was a Jonah, ghost of a man who had died. Terry knocked one across the cabin. They were getting ugly and anything might happen. Then Shand gave the course to Unimak Pass.

"And you'd better find seals," he said to Terry.

The *Laura* was the first schooner in Bering Sea, and that was important in Terry's plan, but they found only fog and wind. Seals sifted through the passes in the Aleutians by the thousands, heading for their breeding grounds on the Pribilofs, and it would be useless, and suicide, to go after them in the white smother and heavy seas.

Tension increased. The third day hunters crowded aft, watching the weather, cursing, talking of a Jonah. Shand leaned against the weather rail, listening, and Terry understood. The skipper would not interfere if the hunters took the mate off his hands. Terry had come to fight one man in Bering Sea, and now found he had twelve against him.

That night, while he was alone on deck, he knew they were planning. Always oaths and loud talk came up the companionway but now voices were low and tense. His rifle was below in his cabin, and even if he had it there'd be eleven rifles against him, with Shand standing to one side. His sole advantage lay in the fact they'd have to come up the companionway one at a time and he got a belaying pin, hoping Shand would be first. That was about all he could do.

The brief night wore on. At two o'clock the wind died, then came gently from the west. Suddenly Terry was aware of light to the northeast and he looked around. The fog had gone. He saw a seal, another, a dozen. The light grew brighter. He beat on the companionway hatch.

"Seals!" he shouted. "Fair weather!"

Shand was first on deck, hunters after him. All saw the sky and the horizon, both pale and clear, and knew they had one of those very rare fine mornings in Bering Sea.

"I'm a Jonah!" Terry said mockingly. "I fixed this! Like I fixed the fog and the wind. How you like it?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Boats over!" Shand said. "To hell with breakfast!"

Seals were everywhere, and not a sail in sight. Terry watched the boats as they fanned out and the direction of each was fixed in his mind. Shand was intent, exultant. He could still have a good season, escape defeat. He looked at Terry, and for the first time a hot light was in his eyes.

"Get goin'!" he said. "Put the stern boat over."

"I'm sleeping," Terry said. "Been on deck all night."

Shand wheeled in a rage. "I'm tellin' you!" he said.

"I'm turning in."

TERRY went below. If he left the schooner he'd never get back. He slept a few hours and when he wakened the *Laura's* motion told him the wind had freshened. The cabin's compass showed it was from the south, which could bring fog.

This was the day.

He slammed down the lever of his rifle, and no shell appeared. The magazine had been full, and now it was empty. Terry filled it, slipped a cartridge into the barrel and went on deck. A heavy fog bank lay to the south, and he smiled.

"Lively!" Shand said. "You can get in half a day."

"I'm not hunting in Bering," Terry said.

Shand turned, angry but alert too.

"You're not building a new schooner," Terry said.

It caught the skipper off guard. He jerked as if hit.

"You took the shells out of my rifle," Terry said. "You could 'a' picked up Al Thacker'n me but you didn't intend to. You never lose a boat outside Bering. You don't lose one here until the last week. When you don't pick up a boat, there's twelve hundred dollars in it. For that you kill two men. You killed eight last year, except I had luck."

Terry spoke in a flat voice, and he jolted Shand, but the skipper instinctively threw himself into attack.

"If you knew so much, why'd you ship with me?" he demanded. "But that's all bunko. A pack o' lies."

Terry ignored it. He felt he had the strength now.

"You're getting what you gave me, Shand," he said. "You'll freeze and starve, stare holes in the fog, crack your ears listening. You'll get weaker, and colder, and wetter. You'll start babbling like Al Thacker did. Al talked about when he was a kid and what his mother cooked. Only you'll babble alone."

Shand suddenly was cool and calculating. He looked around. The nearest hunter was five miles away.

"And the cook's sleeping," Terry said. "Billy Forbes is in his bunk for'ard, after a night on deck."

"You are a Jonah!" Shand said. "Playin' ghost! Wait till the hunters hear about this. And you can't prove a bit of it."

"There's no court here to prove it in. Just you and me, and maybe the ghosts of all the men you've left in Bering Sea. They'll be sitting on your gunnels, Shand. Talking to you. Lash the wheel and set the stern boat in. There's a lunch and a cask of water in her, and a sea anchor I rigged to keep you alive longer."

Shand whirled, charged. Terry cocked and lifted the rifle. The skipper stopped two feet from the muzzle.

"You got a chance in a boat," Terry said. "Might get picked up by another schooner. Here—I've a length of chain to weight you when I dump you overside after I shoot you."

He didn't want to shoot. He wanted Shand to die slowly, as Al Thacker and the others had died, as he himself had nearly died. But above the sights he saw Shand was not afraid.

"Bring her into the wind and lash the wheel," Terry said. "I'm counting ten."

He counted, aloud. At "five" Shand shrugged, slipping a lashing over a spoke as the sails snapped and rattled. He looked at Terry, looked into the muzzle of the rifle, walked to the stern and lowered the boat. He looked at Terry again, climbed over the rail. Terry emptied the rifle and dropped it into the boat. The wind took Shand away from the schooner.

Terry watched him. Shand stood in the tossing dory, not shipping the oars. Terry felt the man was not whipped, and wondered if he could be.

He put the schooner on the port tack. The

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fog bank was sweeping toward him and as the *Laura* drove into the white wall he shouted and beat on the companionway hatch. A sleepy cook came up.

"Where's Shand?" Terry demanded. "Find him! What'n hell's going on here?"

The cook ducked below and Terry's yells brought Billy Forbes from the fo'c's'le. Terry did not leave the wheel but sent the others on a search of the schooner, and while they searched he drove farther to the west in the fog. When the two returned, reporting no sign of Shand, Terry told how he'd come on deck, found the wheel lashed, the *Laura* in thick fog, and no sign of the skipper.

Billy Forbes, looking around in stupefaction, saw the empty davits. "Stern boat's gone!" he exclaimed.

That explained it for Forbes and the cook, and Terry let them build up the story, piece the evidence together. He said only that his rifle had been taken from his cabin.

"Shand didn't like it, getting so few skins," the cook said. "Maybe, in a calm, he shot one from deck and went after it."

"Whoever heard of a calm in Bering?" Terry said. "Now I got to get him and eleven other boats, and no telling where they are. Man the cannon, cook."

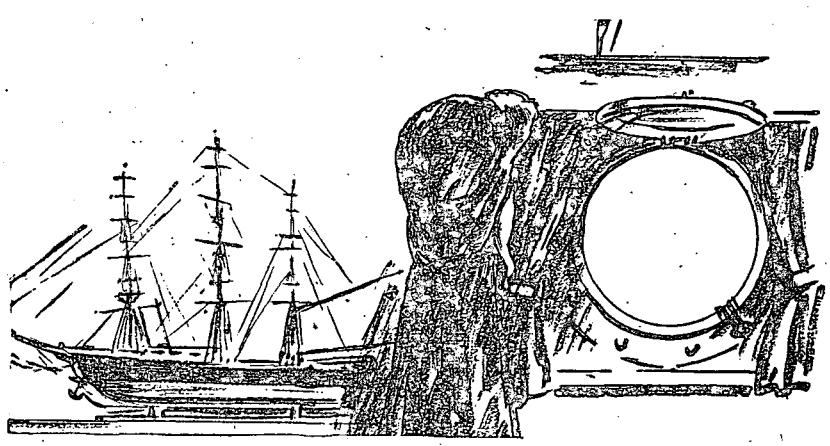
He drove across the wind to the west until he was ten miles from where he had dropped Shand, swung north. He'd seen the boats fan out, knew how reckless or cautious each hunter was, the direction the seals were taking. The cook kept the cannon booming and soon they heard rifle shots, picked up a boat. The hunter said only one boat was west of him. Terry found it, turned east.

Billy Forbes, taking a line as the boats drew alongside, shouted the news and told details. He was excited, didn't leave out anything, and when the hunters came aft Terry said bitterly, "Just to get a skin, Shand left eleven boats adrift."

He kept every man on deck listening for rifle shots, questioned each hunter picked up. At four o'clock he had seven boats. The hunt had been good but the men did not speak of it. At six o'clock, when four boats were still out, they talked of Shand, not that he was lost, but that he had risked lives by a fool trick to which greed had driven him.

TERRY found two more boats before eight. The remaining pair held the best and and most reckless hunters, men who went far and changed course often, gave a skipper gray hairs. On the chart Terry marked out an area in which they could be. It was wide and deep and the fog held. All night he sailed back and forth, and morning came with weather unchanged. Terry tried to find comfort in the thought the two hunters were on Shand's list, would have been left to perish later, and it was no good. He was their killer if he didn't find them.

At noon he got one boat and drove on through the haystack which was the fog of Bering Sea. Another night passed. Dawn came, and a clearing wind. Terry sent men aloft, put on all sail, threshed through icy water. He'd had no sleep, wanted none. He began to imagine the lost men, to feel their cold and hunger and hopelessness. He lived over again his own eight days adrift, with Al Thacker dying, with despair that was no



PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

longer of importance, and as the hours dragged he began to include Nick Shand in his thoughts. Shand would be really hungry, really cold. The last thin threads of hope were slipping. Shand deserved it, but now Terry knew he had no right to risk others. He could have shot Shand without regret. This—

At midnight a distant shot was heard. A lookout saw a flare. Soon the last boat was picked up. The men were unable to get to their feet and hunters, cursing Shand, lifted them aboard. Terry called Billy Forbes to the wheel and went below. He was sick, spent, wanted only forgetfulness, but he couldn't sleep. He'd come north to give Shand his due. Revenge and justice were in his code, but somehow this didn't fit in as he thought it would.

He rolled out, made a dot on the chart. He measured and computed hours and wind, wind shifts, rate of drift of a dory with a sea anchor, compass courses. At last he went on deck and said, "East by north, half a point north. I'm going below. Call me in six hours."

AT SEVEN o'clock he was hunting Shand as fiercely as he had the others, more fiercely, for he'd planned the certainty of Shand's fate. No other schooners, which might pick him up, had entered Bering Sea, and he was too far from the Pribilofs to be sighted by the navy patrol. Shand was doomed.

"To hell with him!" the hunters said. "Let's get to sealin'!" Terry drove on all day, all night. At dawn a lookout sighted a boat.

Terry brought the *Laura* up from leeward. Shand sat in the stern, erect, not turning to look at the schooner. It was as if he had died sitting there.

"Take a line!" Terry called when he was close astern.

Shand swung an arm, waving them off.

"Get the hell out!" he shouted, and four days in an open boat hadn't sapped the power of his voice.

The crew heard in amazement. Terry alone could understand Shand preferred death to acknowledgment of defeat.

"Boat over!" Terry said. "Four men. Bring him aboard."

Shand fought but he was dumped onto the deck amidships. He sprawled there a moment got to his feet and started aft, not with muscles but with will. Hunters blocked his way to the poop.

"You're the dead one now, Shand!" Briggs Asher said. "All the crimps in Port Townsend can't get you a crew when we tell what you done. You're through sealin', you butcher!"

"Stand aside!" Terry shouted from the wheel. "To your gear or I'll be knocking heads together."

The hunters looked up, startled, and fell back. Shand climbed the steps and faced Terry. His thick body trembled from cold and exhaustion but his eyes were steady and hard.

"I'll handle her now," he said.

"You're licked!" Terry said. "Take it!"

Shand's mouth opened, but that was instinctive. No words came and for the first time his eyes admitted he was beaten. He stumbled down the companionway. This was it, not death, defeat.

As if in answer to the lift in Terry's spirit, the rare Bering Sea sun broke through to the west and glistened on the backs of sleeping seals.

"Boats away!" he shouted. "Let's see you get 'em!"

They had a good hunt, and the next day and the next. Terry routed out men who'd had four hours' sleep and sent them to another twenty hours of toil, and they cheered him. They took 221 seals the first day, 236 the next, in five days had more than a thousand. The *Laura* sailed homeward at season's end with 2,680 skins and a crew already hearing the tinkle of its gold on Port Townsend bars.

Terry looked at Scotch Cap as they passed out of Bering Sea. He wasn't leaving Shand behind. Shand didn't die as had those he had sent to death. Shand would spend a lifetime dying.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Luck Can't All Be Bad—Even for a Zoo Bear That Never Had a Mother's Care

No Mother To Guide Him

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

MIKE JESSUP backed his truck up to the bear's cage and then—hesitated. He was a big, tough guy with a heart of gold. "Jerry," he said to his helper, "this is the dirtiest trick I've ever done."

"The dirtiest trick *we've* ever done," Jerry amended. "I like Joe, too. I only hope he don't beg for peanuts. Let's get it over with. I'm not going to look Joe in the eyes, though."

The two men checked the improvised bear cage on the truck and were satisfied of its security. A barred door directly in front of the zoo den door would permit passage from den to truck as soon as the doors were opened.

"Show me a guy who doesn't like bears," Mike said, "a guy who hasn't laughed over their doings, and I'll show you a guy with a hole in his head."

"Everybody likes bears," Jerry said in agreement. "Well, what're we waiting for?"

"Yeah, what're we waiting for," Mike echoed. They neared the front of the cage and Joe sat up on his hind quarters, managed a precarious balance and opened his mouth. His huge front paws dangled like a dog's when begging for food. Joe was begging for peanuts. He knew from experience people tried to throw peanuts into his mouth. The hits he chewed happily. The misses were salvaged from the cage floor later on.

His ludicrous pose usually brought howls of laughter from children and broad smiles from adults. Mike Jessup didn't smile. Jerry complained, "Of course you had to beg, Joe, and make it harder for us."

The zoo keeper joined them. "All set, boys?"

"Yeah," Mike said. "It's a lousy trick, if you ask me, to take a bear, born in captivity and turn him loose in the wilds. Now if he

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was a cub, say, he'd have a mother to guide him. She'd show him how to catch salmon in the creeks. She'd prepare him for the future. He'd know enough to eat skunk cabbage if his system needed toning up, or he got sluggish in middle age, like the advertisements warn you."

"Yeah," Jerry added, "and if he had a mother to guide him he'd know to dodge the hunters in the fall of the year. Dollars to doughnuts he ends up as a rug on somebody's floor."

"Yeah," Mike chimed in, "there are guys in the world who aren't above murdering him while he's sitting up begging for peanuts. And that's what he'll do the first time he sees a fella in the woods. He'll think of peanuts and sit up and open his mouth."

"And the guy will tell his children and his grandchildren how Joe was charging him," Jerry said, painting his gloomy picture to its logical conclusion. "And how the last bullet dropped him when he was nine feet away."

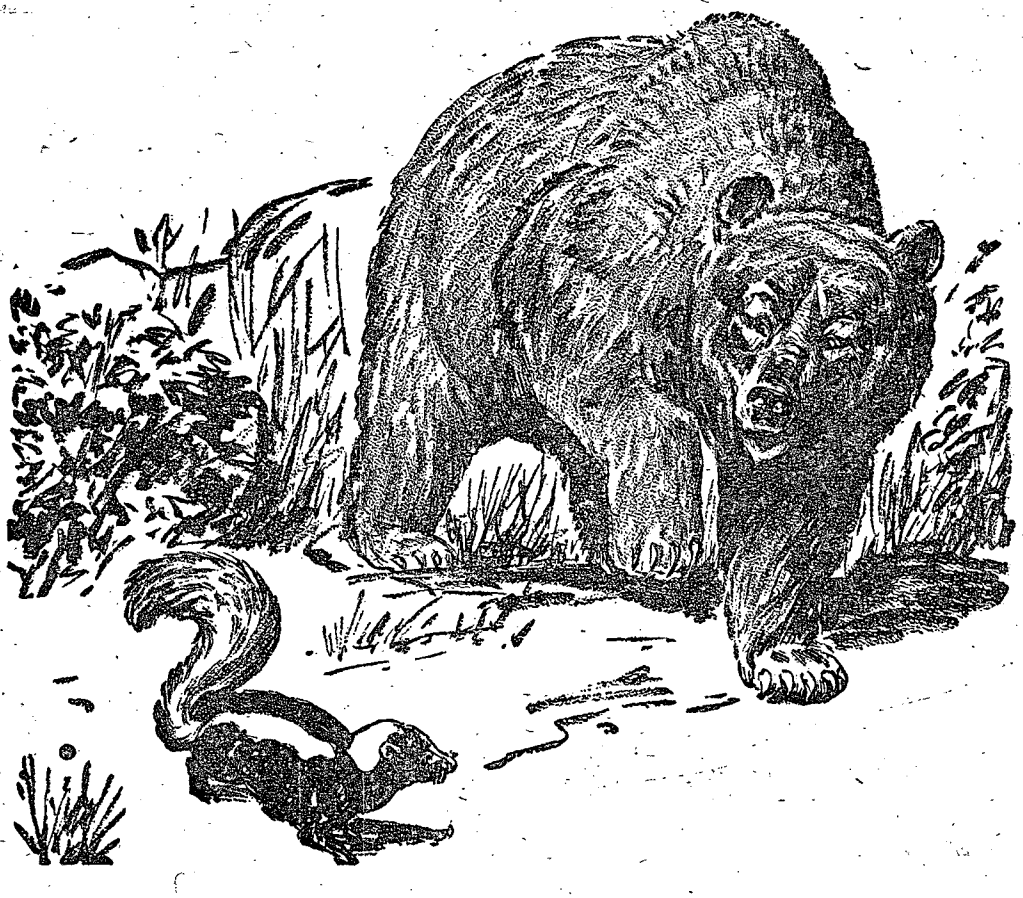
"Don't think for a moment the Park Board members didn't consider all this," the zoo keeper said in a defensive tone. "But the truth is, the cost of everything has gone up. Feeding the meat-eating animals has become a real problem. The taxpayers have been yelling like painted Indians and who can blame them? We had to make cuts somewhere. We can always pick up black bears for a few dollars. Or someone will have a pet cub."

"Yeah, cubs," Mike said, "cute little devils—always wanted one."

"Sure, plenty cute," the zoo man agreed. "Then one morning they wake up and discover they're a bear. They claw the pants off'n you, so you bind your wounds and telephone us to come and get your pets."

"But do you think there'll ever be another bear like Joe?" Mike asked.

"Chances are—yes," the zoo man said after some thought. "And don't think there wasn't a lot of debate and table pounding over Joe's fate. Some argued the merciful thing was—take him out and shoot him. Others said, Joe rated a chance to survive



PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the wilderness—if he could. They said his instincts would develop—"

"That's learning the hard way," Mike said. "A boy needs a mother and father to guide him or else he turns into a problem boy. Of course a bear's old man doesn't hang around, so his mother has to guide him. And considering black bears have managed to survive in spite of civilization and millions of hunters the old ladies must do a good job."

"Well, boys," the zoo keeper said, "there is no use in prolonging the agony."

"It's damned tough on us," Mike muttered. "What am I going to tell my kids when they want to come down here and see Joe?"

"You?" the keeper said with feeling. "What am I going to tell millions of kids. And another thing, I'll have to see the empty cage every time I'm working around this part of the zoo." He opened the doors, tossed peanuts on the floor of the truck cage, and when Joe entered, dropped the door in place.

"Well—so long," Mike said.

"By the way," the keeper said, "don't let anybody know where you release Joe. There are goons at large."

They covered the cage with a tarp, lashed it securely, then Mike inquired, "What about grub? Shouldn't Joe have a snack before we turn him loose?"

"I stuffed him, first thing this morning," the keeper said. "Besides, he's hog fat—in better shape than bears coming out of hibernation."

The truck wallowed and bumped over a gravel road leading to a long-abandoned logging camp. Mike thought they might get stuck in mud holes, but the urge to release Joe a good, healthy distance from civilization kept him taking chances. "Here's the first place I've seen where you can turn around in the last five miles," Jerry said. "This isn't a bad spot. There's a creek below us; a bunch of cedars on a flat; and some swamp in the distance. He's got the tail-end of spring and all summer to learn what his mother would've taught him if he'd been born in the wilderness."

Mike turned the truck around and killed the engine. He jumped to the ground and started climbing a little ridge. "Where you going, Mike?"

"To have another look around," Mike answered. "I'm going to try to imagine I'm a city bear and decide whether I'd like this deal or not."

The two men were puffing when they finally stopped. There was a murmur from the creek, and the musical note of a waterfall blending with the stronger tone of a breeze sweeping through the forest crown. A blue jay, the big timber's faithful sentinel, cursed them with feeling. A half dozen mallard drakes, green heads glistening in the sunshine, paddled about on a lake formed by a beaver dam. Their mates nested in nearby tules and swamp grasses.

A whistling marmot on a rock slide sounded a warning note. Nearby there were faint rustlings as the smaller animals frightened by the truck then reassured by the silence, emerged. High on a nearby mountain they could see a snow-choked gulch spilling water over a cliff.

They liked the country. They liked it fine. "If Joe just catches on, he may go for this spot in a big way," Jerry said. "He might like it even better than the zoo."

"Look there," Mike whispered. "Right by that stump."

A hen pheasant had scratched out a hole in the soft earth and was dusting her feathers. She finally stretched, then seemed to doze in the sunshine. After awhile, as if suddenly remembering she should be on her eggs, she disappeared.

"I'm glad I sized up this place," Mike said. "If my kids ask about Joe I can tell 'em where he's moved to."

THEY went down to the truck, removed the tarp, then Jerry climbed onto the seat while Mike opened the cage door and hastily joined him. "No telling what he'll do after all this jolting around," Mike said.

Joe did nothing, but blink at the great outdoors. "End of the line, Joe, this is where you get off!" Mike yelled. "Come on, you big lug, get going!"

"Aw hell," Jerry said. "I think he's afraid. He's never seen anything like this before—only bars, folks and kids with peanuts. He doesn't feel safe away from bars."

"Yeah, come to think of it, the only thing he knows is folks, kids, peanuts and cages," Mike said. "Got any ideas about our next move?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"My mind's blown a fuse, I guess," Jerry confessed. "I can't think of anything that adds up."

"Start the truck suddenly," Mike said tentatively, "and he might slide out?"

"Try it," Jerry said.

Mike started the truck suddenly and Joe began sliding, then he dug in his claws and they held. "He gave us a reproachful look," Jerry said. "You'd think we'd hit him with a club. If we had some peanuts—"

"There's nothing like hind sight," Mike commented. "As my grandmother used to say, if wishes were fishes we'd have some fried."

"Do your kids ever ride with you and eat peanuts?" Jerry asked.

"Yeah—why?"

"I never saw a kid yet who didn't grab a fistful of peanuts, then drop one or two. Let's move the seat cushions," Jerry said. They moved the seat cushions and Jerry shouted, "Here are three beat-up peanuts. They're kinda worn where the cushion has rubbed against them."

"But they look like peanuts and they smell like peanuts," Mike said. "Get on top of the cage, let Joe sniff 'em, then throw 'em into the road."

Jerry held the peanuts near the door and Joe's attitude changed to one of lively interest. Jerry tossed the peanuts to the ground. Joe looked down, but he wasn't inclined to leave the cage. He stretched his neck and sniffed. "Hang on, Jerry!" Mike said.

He slammed in the clutch, the truck leaped. Joe and Jerry hit the ground a split second apart, though, later, when Mike related the story he said that Jerry stopped in mid-air, dug in his heels and created such an air cushion between them that he was able to leap to the cage which Joe had just vacated.

"When bigger damned fools are born," Jerry said bitterly, "they'll be named Mike Jessup. Damn Hitler for starting all the trouble that led to the high cost of living that led to exiling tame bears into the wilderness."

He climbed over the cage to the cab. They looked back. Joe had eaten the three beat-up peanuts, and was now balanced on his haunches, front paws dangling, a genial gleam in his eyes, his mouth wide open.

"Aw—hell!" Mike muttered. He drove rapidly down the road and out of Joe's life.

JOE sniffed. His nostrils were assailed by strange odors. The one familiar odor —exhaust fumes that he had known from infancy—led down the road. He lumbered along for nearly a mile, not knowing exactly why. Perhaps some deep instinct urged Joe to seek the familiar and the single familiar thing in this great land was burned gasoline. He stopped at last and sat down on his haunches. He was over-weight, unaccustomed to long walks, and tired easily.

After a brief rest Joe started down the steep bank to the creek. There was nearly six hundred pounds of him, and he started a dirt slide which made an uproar in the otherwise peaceful forest. Joe hit the creek with a splash that sent trout scurrying to deep holes, then climbed onto a sand bar. He drank briefly, and found the water icy and good.

It was midafternoon when Joe found the game trail—worn deep by hooves and paws. It followed the creek some distance, detoured a canyon where the water ran swift and the rocky walls were sheer, then returned to the creek bank to avoid a stand of cedars. The trail crossed a tiny stream supplied from the drainage of a small swamp where skunk cabbage grew. Joe sniffed, then tasted the green leaves. He liked them fine and ate with growing enthusiasm.

Night came and he curled up in the brush and slept. He awakened at dawn and from habit paced about waiting for the keeper to come with food. A new and interesting scent filled his nostrils as a vagrant breeze stirred the brush. He followed the scent which came from a log. Bees stood guard at a crack, but it was too early for honey gathering. The flowers were still drenched with dew. Joe put his nose to the crack and sniffed. The intriguing new odor was overpowering. Then something near his nose buzzed. A stabbing pain followed. Joe snorted and backed off.

The sentinel bee which had stung Joe and died had sounded the alarm previous to attack. A deep buzzing filled the hollow log. Joe's claws curved through the crack, then pulled. A ten-foot slab of cedar, two inches thick and seven or eight in width

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gave way, revealing rows of comb—and thousands of bees. Joe made a swipe with his paw. It dripped with comb, honey and bees. He licked his paw and bees stung his tongue. But the honey was the most wonderful food he had ever tasted. He swiped and licked while the bees settled on his fur and tried to penetrate his thick hide.

They stung his lips, eye lids and nose and he bawled like a baby but kept on eating. His appetite satisfied, Joe lumbered to the swamp hotly pursued by the bees. He rolled in the muck, smeared his nose, snorted and shook his head. When he curled up that night his eyelids were almost closed. He awakened and peered at the world through slits. The smell of honey came to his nostrils from smears on his coat—deep, thick smears from which bees struggled to escape.

A NEW scent intrigued him that afternoon. Again it came from a log. He tore it apart and fed on grubs and finished the meal with a skunk cabbage salad.

During the next few weeks he lost weight steadily, but gained in toughness and strength. The grasses and grubs he ate were inadequate to the demands of his activity. He hunted constantly for food and occasionally dug out mountain beavers and even tried to catch a rabbit. He was constantly hungry and hope leaped suddenly when he encountered several fur-bearers on the game trail—fur-bearers which didn't bother to retreat as all others had done.

Had he been born out of captivity, his mother would have conveyed the grim truth —skunks are lords of the trail. Early that morning, no doubt, this mother skunk had explained they were going for a walk in the great forest and that nothing would harm them. "Stand your ground," she had probably said, "and if the intruder advances, raise your tails. If this warning goes unheeded—watch Mother."

As the skunks stood their ground, Joe was pleased. No digging involved; no racing futilely through the forest—just step up and help yourself. The skunks' tails hoisted in warning, as one. And beautiful tails they were.

Joe rushed in for his first bite, and then something happened. He moaned dismally, snorted, shook his head, then tried to outrun the menacing odor that surrounded him in clouds. He pounded headlong through a thicket frightening several chipmunks and some nesting birds, then he put on a final burst of speed that carried him to the brink of a gulch. Joe turned aside, saw a log spanning the gulch and lumbered onto it. His mother would have warned him never to climb onto a log without first testing its strength. He was half way across when it broke spilling Joe and rotten fragments into the gulch. He clawed his way out in a frenzy that loosened rocks and added to the din.

Again he turned to the swamp in his dire need. He rolled in the muck until he was plastered, but for a long time thereafter Joe found it difficult to live with himself. When he rolled on the grass, days later, the hunks of caked and dried muck pulled out veritable mats of his hair. It was the shedding season, and Joe took on a ragged look. When he saw his reflection in pools, he was ashamed of himself. He was like a peacock that had caught a glimpse of his feet.

IT WAS mid-July when Joe saw his first human being in the period of liberation. She was slim, lovely and blond. She was deftly casting a fly on a riffle. Joe glowed happily. Human beings meant peanuts.

He approached within fifty feet. The murmuring stream muffled what little noise he made. Joe hoisted himself up on his haunches, let his front paws dangle limply, opened his mouth and rolled his eyes hopefully. The young woman glancing over her shoulder to assure herself the line wouldn't tangle with a limb on the next cast saw Joe. She tried to scream but her constricted vocal cords gave forth only a choking sound. She dropped her pole, plunged into the stream, splashed to the opposite bank and ran like a deer to her husband two hundred yards down the creek. Her lips formed the words, "George! Bear!" Her face was the color of chalk and her eyes were round with fright.

"Huh?" George asked, refusing to be frightened.

This husbandly trait did it. Fury triumphed over hysteria. "A bear, you darned fool!" she screamed. "We'll be eaten alive! And you told me there were no bears on Lost Creek, and if there were they would

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

run from me. Well this one didn't. He was seven feet tall, weighed at least a ton and was coming at me with his mouth wide open, fangs gleaming. To my dying day, which may be nearer than *you* realize," she continued bitterly, "I'll remember those white, gleaming fangs."

"Seven feet tall and weighing over a ton," George said mildly, "a bear of such dimensions would be all out of shape."

"So you don't believe I saw a bear, and was almost eaten alive?" she demanded in a furious tone.

"You saw something, Marie," George said. "I'll have a look."

"George! You'll be torn apart! You haven't even a revolver!" she protested, wifely worry now replacing indignation.

"There isn't an animal in the woods that won't run," George said, "unless it is a she-bear with cubs. Did this one have cubs?"

"At least four," Marie answered

"Four? She must've adopted a couple," George mildly suggested.

He sauntered back and was so calm about it all Marie could cheerfully have murdered him. She followed, ready to take off over the mountains at the slightest sign of danger.

George looked across the creek and Joe, puzzled by Marie's flight, was gazing pensively at the water. He appeared to be very depressed over the entire business. In Joe's book people arrived, tossed him a few peanuts and departed. He had taken Marie's abrupt departure in stride, mixed with a sense of loss. Joe perked up when he saw George, and went into his routine.

"Hell!" George exclaimed. "That's Joe! Good old Joe!"

"I suppose he calls you George," Marie sniffed, her knees rubbery from fright. "Good old Joe! Good old, palsy walsy George!"

"The zoo bear, darling. Remember? The argument among Park Board members over destroying or releasing him? And the two truck drivers who refused to tell where they released him?" George said.

"Vaguely," Marie answered.

George thought he'd chide her about the four cubs, but his second thought was much more sensible. This wasn't the time nor place a protective instinct warned him.

"I've never seen a more disreputable, moth-eaten, run-down creature," Marie said. "Is it any wonder I was frightened."

"His pelt will be prime this fall when the shooting starts," George said. He was a big game hunter, a salt and fresh water fisherman and he was trying, with uncertain success, to sell Marie on his way of life. "Joe's pelt will make a fine rug."

"George!" she exclaimed, "you would not!"

"Someone will, if it's known Joe is on this particular creek," George said.

"It'd be lousy sportsmanship," Marie said. "Now that I've recovered from my fright—as much as I'll ever recover—it is apparent shooting Joe would be like shooting fish in a barrel. Look at the chump sitting there begging. For peanuts, likely. I'm beginning to like him. He's a comedian. But—I don't think I'll cross the creek and retrieve my pole."

"Cost twenty-five bucks," George said. "You can't buy reels like that these days, so—" He crossed the stream, picked up the pole and rejoined her. Joe looked hurt. The pair disappeared downstream without leaving so much as one nut.

BUT luck can't be all bad, even for a bear that has never had a mother's guidance. When his weight was well under the five hundred mark, and his coat was as loose as ashes, the late run of steelhead trout came. To build up the run, the game commission had closed the stream to salmon fishing, but bears didn't count.

Joe squatted on the bank and tried to claw them out as they passed, then in sheer desperation he plunged into the stream. A sheet of spray shot into the air. Steelhead darted in every direction, but Joe's dripping jaws held a gleaming fish. He ate it on the grass near the bar, then rushed back.

Day after day he gorged on the salmon. Nature did the remainder, building up thick layers of fat to see him through his first winter's hibernation. His coat was heavy and warm with a rich gloss that made it the finest and largest potential rug in the region.

Closing Lost Creek to steelhead fishermen had limited the number of sportsmen who had seen Joe's tracks. Only George and Marie had actually seen the bear. As it

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was not deer or upland bird country, the men who planned to hunt on the creek had dwindled to the few who remarked, "I'd sure like to get a crack at that Lost Creek bear."

Two days before the hunting season opened, George, Marie and four of their friends arrived with dogs. They sent the dogs into the creek bottom and stationed themselves along the banks. It wasn't long until they heard the dogs baying. Joe made no effort to escape. He had seen dogs around the zoo, and he had heard the wolves howl. A creature who believed in live and let live, it was okay with Joe if wolves wanted to howl. The awakening came when a dog nipped him.

Joe left on the dead run with the dogs after him. He crossed the creek at a point where the swift, high water from heavy mountain rains carried the dogs several hundred yards downstream. With this lead, Joe made a noisy advance upstream. He saw George in an open stretch ahead of him and promptly stopped. He assumed his peanut-begging stance. George raised something resembling a black stick. Flame coned around one end, and something struck Joe's stomach. A roar filled his ears.

Joe tumbled over backwards, rolled to his feet and crossed the stream again. "He's coming your way, Eddie," George yelled.

"I see him," Eddie replied. He stepped from cover and fired.

Joe retraced his steps, saw George and turned suddenly. He was utterly sick of mankind. He associated mankind with thunder and pain. As swift as Joe managed to turn, George was swifter. Again the roar and invisible bites. "Barney," George yelled, "he's heading for you."

"I hear him," Barney answered. "Here he comes!" Barney's weapon filled the canyon with echoes.

Joe was frantic. He felt himself trapped and knew real fear for the first time in his life. He went straight up a steep ridge and long after he vanished over the crest, stones rolled through the brush and into the creek. He was still going when he noticed a cedar snag. The thicket at the base offered sanctuary. He sniffed, then investigated.

Joe couldn't know it, but years ago a she bear had denned up in a hole she had dug under the snag. The entrance was covered with spider webs, but Joe pushed through them and sniffed, then he went inside. A sense of security he had known only in the zoo cage filled him. But this was better. It was without bars. It was a good place to sleep—a retreat on rainy days.

He heard men coming, but he wanted no part of them. He remained tense and watchful. "He's in there, George," a voice said.

"Yeah," George answered. "When it is colder and snow flies, Joe will hole up. When he comes out next spring, he'll have forgotten zoos, crowds and peanuts. He'll sharpen a few instincts, and keep away from men and dogs. You don't suppose we hurt him any?"

"Rock salt, fired with light loads at a decent distance did nothing more than sting his thick pelt and taught him that from here on in to beware of man. Joe doesn't know it yet, but his happiest days are ahead of him. I'm glad."

The deputy suspected he was being asked to collaborate in yet another murder!

"Deputy Cotter's Scrapbook"

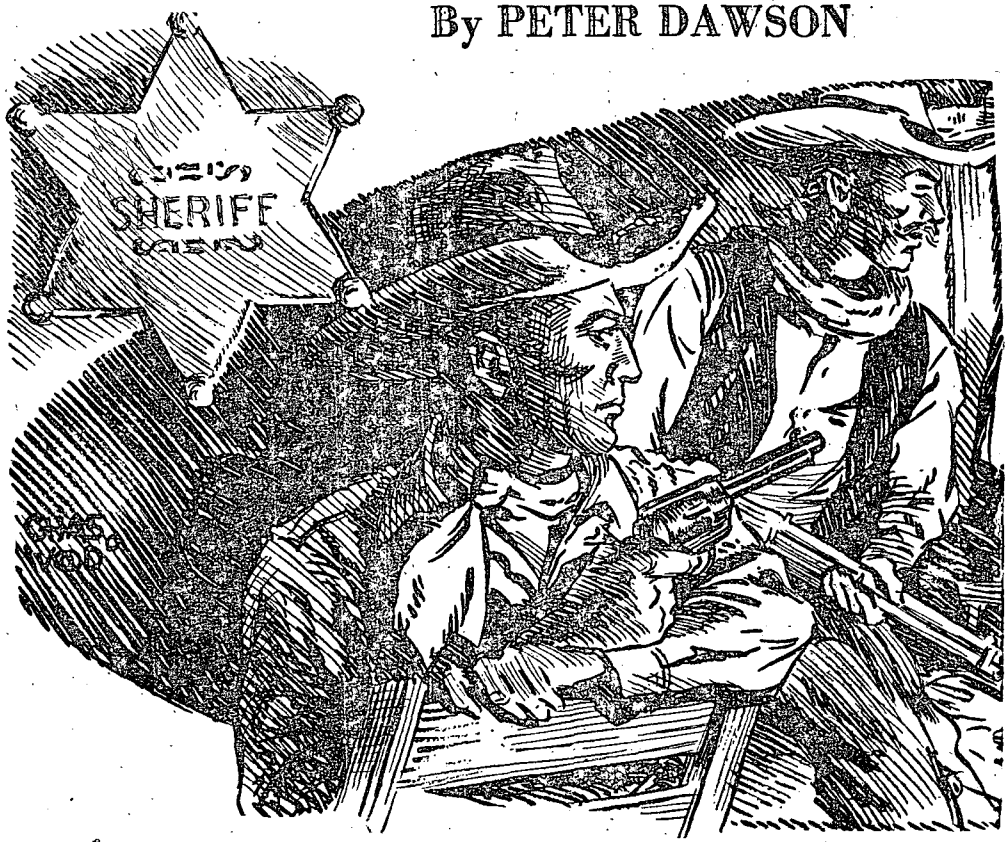
MERLE CONSTINER

In the next . . . . . SHORT STORIES

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Stirrup Boss

By PETER DAWSON



I

HE STOOD on the coach's platform behind the tender, not minding the smoke and the jolting as the train ran in on Lodgepole past a scene that bridged the eight year gap. The deepening dusk didn't let him see much. But it was enough to bring homesickness he hadn't known was in him.

That hump on the far hill would be Sam Olds' dynamite bunker. Beyond, where the tall lodgepole pines thinned out, the skeletal chimney of Drury's lightning-fired stage station slid past, lonely and etching sharply against the deep azure above the broken horizon to the west. Then Carson's corrals laid a blur against the near darkness.

The brakes screeched and the coach was swaying violently as the first house lights came up out of the obscurity. He noticed that the slender spire of the courthouse was newly shingled, that a white-painted house stood on Ames' lot, vacant these many years. The faded lettering of the livery barn's sign with its backward "N" was the same, so was the brickrust red of Bill Yount's saloon front.

Fred Vance picked up valise and saddle as the coach rolled in on the station's cinder ramp, an exceedingly tall man powerfully built across the shoulders but otherwise lean in every measurement. This quality was especially noticeable in his deeply-tanned face. Its boney structure was quite pronounced and gave his wide-spaced blue eyes an intentness less noticeable when he smiled, which was often. His medium-brown hair was bleached at sides and back where his wide hat had let the sun hit it. His outfit was a shade better than the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Whole Lodgepole Country Was to Be in on the Historic Struggle to Be Boss of Stirrup Range

Part I

average 'puncher's, being a black coat over a maroon flannel shirt, waist-overalls just beginning to fade at the thighs and a pair of soft well-fitting boots, polished. He wore a staghorn-handled .41 Colt's in a holster hanging low at his right thigh.

Loaded as he was he stood nicely balanced against the train's jolting stop before swinging his high frame down the steps. He carried the saddle's weight easily and as he stood there looking at figures moving to and fro in the light of the station lanterns the expectancy and eagerness that had given his lean face youthful cast gradually faded before a definite reserve. Finally he recognized one man's slim shape and his eyes lost their good humored glint and became taciturn.

This man he had noticed with back turned and in that moment Fred Vance's impulse was to walk out across the siding and avoid this meeting. But then he thought, *Might as well get it over with,* and sauntered back along the ramp. The other turned finally, saw him and hurried his way.

THERE was no handshake—the saddle and valise helped there—yet the older man made a pretense at affability. "Damn, boy, you're big! Big as your father was. How are you?"

"Fine, Milt. You look the same." Commonplace as the greeting was, Vance was relieved to have it spoken. He'd been wondering what he'd say to Milt Hurd.

"Here, let me give you a hand." Hurd was only slightly ill at ease as he took the valise. And as they started around the station-corner Vance sighed gently, thankful for the moment being no more awkward than it was.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Had your supper yet, Fred?"

"On that train?"

Vance chuckled, looking obliquely down and finding it hard to believe that he topped his step-father by nearly a head. He had always remembered Milt Hurd as being tall and handsome. Now he saw that the man was neither. He was thin almost to gauntness except in the face, which had a loose-fleshed and pasty look. The salting of gray in the wide brown mustache robbed him of the silky look Vance remembered. Hurd's serge coat was shiny and frayed at the cuffs, his gray pants baggy at the knees. Vance put his own meaning to all this and it didn't please him.

"Well, you'll have to chew your cud a bit longer," Hurd said now. "This other can't wait." He was already breathing hard at the unaccustomed exertion.

"What other?"

"Jim Kirby."

Vances stride slowed, stopped. When the older man halted and turned, Vance said nothing. He wanted the silence to crowd Hurd. It did, for shortly Milt said, "Now don't get your dander up, Fred. I had to do it this way. Otherwise you wouldn't have come."

He could see the chill in Vance's eyes and added, "There won't be a wrangle. The papers are drawn up and the senator's agreed to everything."

"So it's 'the senator' now, is it?" Vance's drawl was dry as dust. "When's the next train south?"

"Half an hour from now. Kirby's taking it. You can, too. But you've got to sign this lease, Fred. It's our only way out."

"I told you there wasn't to be a lease. You said it was a sale."

"I know. And maybe it'll turn out to be one."—Milt Hurd sighed wearily. "Don't think it doesn't gall me. But it's either a lease or milk the place dry paying interest. I thought we might get something out of it."

IN THIS moment Vance was seeing Hurd for what he was, the near-empty shell of the once charming man his mother had chosen in her second marriage. And slowly his anger left him. Eight years of forgetting made it hard to hold the old grudge and now he was surprised to find his contrariness little more than a point of pride. This was primarily Hurd's affair and the thought struck him, *Why not? There's damned little left, regardless.* So when he spoke it was mildly:

"It won't cost me anything to listen."

"That's better." Hurd's relief was obvious as they started on, heading along the short sidestreet. "I've had Tom Demmler included. He'll have everything east of The Springs, something like eleven sections."

Vance nodded. "At least that makes sense. We might even sell that graze to Tom. Though it's late in the game to be making it up for having chased old Demmler off into the hills."

"Demmler was a rustler, Fred."

Vance laughed softly, surprising himself. He really didn't much care what the present or past politics of this country might be. Eight years had let him put down roots in another place far to the south in New Mexico Territory. So now he could look back over what he remembered of his father's beginnings and pronounce fair judgment.

"Didn't they all close an eye to that sort of thing in those days? I'd hate to be hangin' a day for every hide the old man scorched that wasn't his. He and Kirby were two strong men fighting each other. They just plain helped themselves and crowded Demmler out."

"Maybe so."

"No maybe about it."

"Kirby's changed, Fred. Getting him to Washington has calmed him down."

Vance had nothing to say to that. He was noticing again how short of breath Hurd was and now as they turned into Main Street past the harness shop he reached down and took the valise, drawling, "You've gone soft."

"Never get out any more." Hurd took out a handkerchief and wiped his brow. "When this is over I'm going across on the Arrowhead for a spell. The antelope are thick as ticks over there."

Vance was scarcely listening as his eye hungrily roamed the familiar dark street. Just then it came to him that no matter how far a man wanders the ties of the early years are strongest. He'd like to stay on a

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

few days and work this odd liking for the country out of his system.

They were passing Yount's lighted window and he caught himself about to suggest turning in there for a glass, remembering at the last moment his stepfather's weakness. Milt would need his wits about him if they were seeing Kirby. *The Senator!* he thought wryly. He wasn't letting his mind dwell too long on Milt's betrayal of his mother's wishes in granting any lease. Instead he was telling himself that times had changed, that she would have understood. Yet there was the nagging suspicion that this wasn't exactly so, that the change was in himself, in his no longer caring.

It would be best for him to pull out tonight, to clear up this business and get out. He'd wanted to see Josh Hawks, the last of the old crew, even wanted to see Stirrup itself. But why probe at a nearly-healed wound by any further reminders than he was having now? Stirrup was finished except as a source of small income. Its greatness that had steadily waned since the day his mother remarried was gone for good. And there was little point in blaming Milt Hurd. The man's drinking and his disregard of money were weaknesses that no longer mattered. The thing was done and Stirrup was only a magnificent picture hazed to near nothingness by the passage of the years.

"Your train was later than I'd thought—" Hurd was hurrying now as they came abreast the hotel veranda and started up the steps. "Kirby'll be tearing his hair out."

"The hell with Kirby." Vance spoke mildly but meant it.

THERE were two brass-bound trunks standing by the steps and Vance dropped saddle and valise alongside them, noticing that a wagon with the legend *Transfer* painted along its side-board waited at the street's edge. He heard the lobby door open and turned, thinking Hurd had gone on in. But his stepfather was standing hat in hand holding the door wide for a tall and slender young woman with dark hair, followed by two men lugging another trunk.

"'Evening, Rita," Hurd said, his tone unctuous. "Look like you're planning a long stay."

"We are, Milt. Better hurry on up. Dad's pacing the floor."

The girl came on out, glancing Vance's way as she passed. He was trying to see what this daughter of Kirby's was like, but she faint light showed him little more than the pale oval of her face and her dark, alive eyes on him.

He eased around the men with the trunk and followed Hurd into the lobby, and as they started for the stairs he said, "I'd forgotten Kirby had a daughter."

"Probably because Marguerite's younger than you. By six years as I remember it. She's just past twenty."

Now that his memory had been jogged Vance could vaguely recall a gangling youngster in pigtails who had ridden a spotted pony to school. That was the only picture his mind's eye could summon of Jim Kirby's daughter as they crossed the lobby, deserted except for three men standing by the entrance to the bar. A low run of voices sounded from in there. As Hurd and Vance passed the counter by the foot of the stairs they stopped again to step aside for a man coming down the steps lugging a heavy suitcase. And once again Hurd spoke with that false affability Vance had noticed on the veranda. "Looks like he's clearin' out for good, Bill."

"So it does." The man, shad-bellied and sober of face, took in Vance incuriously and went on.

There had been something familiar about him and Vance, following Hurd up the steps, asked, "Haven't I seen that one before?"

"More than likely. Bill Childers, the senator's wagon boss."

Of course. Only eight years ago Childers had been running a small bunch of cattle on a homestead over in the Rainbows, trying to get a start. He was older than Vance by a few years and Vance remembered him as being quiet and likeable.

Upstairs they turned back toward the street and Hurd led the way along the uncarpeted hallway to the last door and knocked, sighing gustily. He was saying, "Now let's try not to ruffle the old—" when the opening of the door cut him short.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was Jim Kirby who stood there. He was grayer, heavier perhaps, but beyond that hadn't changed at all. He was still as big a man as Vance had ever seen, so tall and solidly wide as almost to fill the doorway. His face was craggy, square, and his dark eyes piercing as they slid past Hurd and took in Vance.

"We thought you'd been shanghaied," he said in a deep, booming voice. "Come in, come in."

His brusqueness fitted him well and as Vance followed his step-father in past Kirby he was feeling some of the resentment toward the man that had been so much a part of his upbringing. Just then he wondered as he never had before what the circumstances might now be had his father and Kirby stayed together as partners.

THEY had come here as such, bringing a herd of Texas longhorns, had together built the first sod-roofed cabin along the lush slope of the Wigwams to the north. A winter together had finished their partnership and the next spring they had gone their separate ways, two dominant personalities unable to get along under the same roof—or even on the same range, as it turned out. And over the twenty years of their difference John Vance had matched downright courage and shrewdness against big Jim Kirby's stubbornness and envy. In the end the elder Vance had won for Stirrup the heart of the rich graze below the foothills and Kirby had taken his pick of what was left, grudging Vance his holdings even after his death. And now it seemed that he was still keeping on with that fight.

Almost never did Fred Vance feel small in a man's presence. But now as he turned to hang his hat on the rack by the door, following Hurd's example, the man's massiveness had that effect upon him. Kirby was lifting a hand to indicate two other men who had risen from chairs at the bay window overlooking the street, saying, "You remember Leonard Keely, Vance. And Tom Demmler."

Keely, the lawywer, was a spare, small man and Vance stepped across to shake hands with him as he said reservedly, "How are you, Vance?"

Then it was Tom Demmler, his square and ruddy face taking on a broad grin, who gave Vance the only genuine welcome of the evening. "Fred, you're a sight for sore eyes!"

"You, too, Tom." Vance could feel that Demmler's handclasp meant something and he was momentarily thankful for the presence of at least one man he could count on not to oppose him in what he sensed was coming.

Kirby was pushing the chairs out to make a wider circle and, taking the one that had its back to the table lamp, he glanced pointedly at the clock on the mantlepiece, saying, "Sit, all of you. We've got exactly seventeen minutes before the train's due. Let's get this over with."

Keely, Demmler and Hurd took chairs as Kirby was reaching to the inside pocket of his coat to bring out a sheaf of papers. He looked up at Vance. "Have a seat. Did Milt explain everything?"

"Nothing except that you want a lease." Vance hadn't taken a chair but was leaning against the corner of the table, hands in the pocket of his waist-overalls. To remain standing seemed the simplest way of putting himself on an even footing with the senator.

Kirby eyed Hurd briefly in annoyance, then said, "Here's the arrangement. Demmler and I split the lease and between us pay two thousand a year. He gets the line camp at The Springs, I use the main layout to add to the Box. Briefly, that's what this says." He slapped the papers across his open palm in a gesture of finality.

"Then there's the option, Jim." Keely inserted that quiet word as he leaned over the table to flick the ash from his cigar.

"Option?" Vance was taking a sack of tobacco from coat pocket, about to build a smoke, when the door opened and he looked around. It was Kirby's daughter and once again she was only a shape in the shadows he couldn't really see. "An option on what?"

"Stirrup. What else?" Kirby seemed annoyed at the closing of the door and looked around. "All right, Rita. I'm coming fast as I can."

"The things are on the way to the station, Dad."

"I know. I'll be along in a minute."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kirby settled back in his chair to eye Vance enigmatically. "If we don't wait too long the layout's still worth something. Of course the house needs repair. I'll have to rebuild some sheds and the corrals. Then it'll cost something to grub out the thistles and string new wire at some weak spots. But—"

"You've set a price?" Vance cut in.

Kirby's head had come up sharply. "Naturally."

"Mind telling me what it is?"

"My share would be ten thousand dollars, Tom's four."

A smile that was slow in coming broke across Vance's lean face. "This isn't a joke, is it?" he asked, glancing briefly at Hurd and then back at Kirby again.

"Joke? Far from it." Kirby eyed Hurd disdainfully. "Just what is this, Milt? I thought you said you'd told him."

Tom Demmler shifted uneasily in his chair as Hurd lifted his bony shoulders, saying, "I had some idea of getting him here and thrashing it out." His look pled with Vance. "Fred, the place has gone faster than I could keep up with it. Last year it was a new roof for the barn, the year before repairing the foundations on the old part of the house. Your father had built them of rock and mud and they'd weathered so—"

Fred Vance lifted a hand, waving him to silence. He was ignoring Hurd now, his attention on Kirby. "Fourteen thousand, is it? Let's see—that's somthing less than fifty cents the acre. Around three hundred fifty dollars the section. Has land come down that much around here since I pulled out?"

Kirby said nothing, only glared.

"How many rooms in the house?" Vance finished building his smoke and lit it and Kirby gave a visible start at the sound of the match scraping the table's underside.

"Ten, I believe."

"A ten room house, half log, half rock. How many miles of fence would you say? Sixty, seventy?" Vance laughed softly, though there was no amusement in him. "The day's long gone when you can steal land, Kirby."

The big man's hands gripped the arms of the chair. His face took on color and his dark eyes came afire with hostility. "You'll damn' well—"

"Dad!"

Kirby's head came around at that quiet yet intent word. Looking across at Rita Kirby, Vance was once again disappointed at not being able to see her more clearly. She stood near the door leaning against the wall looking at her father; or so the shadows made it seem. And something in the quality of her mild reprimand now carried its weight with her parent, for Kirby's tone was more reasonable as he spoke again:

"Look, Vance—" He leaned forward in his chair, wagging a finger in emphasis. "I've had a crew in there for sixty days. There are upward of two hundred head of my beef inside your fence. A carpenter's at work on the house. And—"

"And no lease."

Kirby stiffened and slowly came up out of the chair. It looked as though he was about to lunge at Vance. "Milt," he said, his regard not straying from Vance, "you promised that lease! Your signature's on it. Everything would be smooth as silk, you claimed. So I took you at your word and moved on in."

"Dad, we're missing the train." Not until the girl had spoken did any of them really notice the final note of a train's whistle moaning loudly and nearby.

Kirby listened and once again that sound came. "Rita, go down there and tell them to hold the train," he snapped.

"They won't. It's the express."

"Then listen, Vance." Kirby's impatience made him speak hoarsely. "I'm in there on a promised lease. I'm going to—"

"You're in there on nothing but thin air, Kirby."

The senator visibly flinched and his jaw corded in anger. His glance went to Keely. "Len, I'll expect you to look after my rights."

But the lawyer only shook his head, looking at Vance to say, "It's not too good an offer, Fred. But not a bad one, either. You'll spend a lot fixing the place up. Have you got it to spend?"

"No."

"Then my advice is to get out while you can."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Fred," Milt Hurd had to swallow before he could go on, "this is probably the last dealings we'll have with each other. I've had it in mind to go to the coast to a lower country. So you won't have me on your hands after this is over. But it's my only chance to see my way clear. I can't go on here. I owe almost as much as my share if that option is taken up."

"You've always owed money." Vance hated having to insert this reminder. But he was seeing now that Stirrup mattered more than he had realized. "Give me a few weeks and I'll find an outfit to lease to. There must be a dozen cattle companies willing to go in there without the idea of buying. And at a better figure."

"Dad, we'd better be going."

A RUMBLING sound came from the rear of the building and the floor trembled as the train rolled down the back alley. Jim Kirby came around the end of the table, standing within a stride of Vance now. He was fully erect, as though counting on his massive stature to carry his point. "This is my last word. Will you sign?"

"No." Vance eased from the edge of the table. "So start moving off the place."

For a moment he was expecting to be hit, was planning on exactly how he would roll with the blow and where he would throw his fist at that vast expanse of Kirby's coat-front. Then all at once the tension broke. An enigmatic, almost smiling look eased the hardness from Kirby's craggy face and he swung to the door, taking his hat from the rack.

Rita Kirby stepped out into the hall and briefly her father stood regarding Vance in that same near-smiling way. Then he was gone, the door closing behind him.

Milt Hurd's sigh struck across the stillness as Kirby's solid tread faded along the corridor. Then Len Keely broke the awkward silence. "Well, gentlemen, that's decided. Shall we go below and have a drink on it?"

"I could use one," Hurd said in a far-away voice.

"There's one thing more." Vance looked at Tom Demmler now, realizing his friend hadn't spoken once since the beginning of their talk. "We'll go ahead with your end of the lease, Tom. But without the option. That suit you?"

Demmler grinned relievedly and with open surprise. "Does it! I'm lucky to get anything. I've been the fifth wheel on this cart since the beginning."

"Understand, you don't get to buy. Not yet at any rate."

"I get it. Sure."

"Then can you draw up the papers, Keely?"

The lawyer nodded. "They'll be ready by noon tomorrow. Only I hope you know what you're doing."

"If I don't right now I soon will."

Milt Hurd came across and laid a hand on Vance's arm. His look was imploring as he said, "Take a second thought, Fred. Maybe there is a chance of your making a better deal. Then agin maybe there isn't. This is two thousand dollars, a thousand apiece for us every year. I can get back on my feet again with that kind of money to help me."

Vance looked down at him pityingly, without anger. "We won't go into my reasons for saying this, Milt, but I don't give a damn about you getting back onto your feet. Not one damn!" And he turned away, going over to get his hat.

"I wish you didn't feel that way about it, Fred."

Vance merely shrugged, looking at the other two. "Ready?"

Demmler and Keely followed him out the door, Hurd not coming into the hallway until he had blown out the lamp and they were turning at the head of the stairs. "Someone should have taken him in hand the day your mother passed away," Keely muttered as they went down the steps. And he added with a note of regret, "No one hates this worse than I do. I can remember some high times at Stirrup in John and Esther's day."

"You may see some again." There were vague stirrings in Vance's mind and he was wishing he could believe what he said.

They were half way across the lobby and headed for the bar when the front door swung open abruptly and Jim Kirby and his daughter reentered from the veranda. Kirby was carrying a suitcase and set it down when he saw them.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Hope you're satisfied, Vance," he said aridly. "We missed it."

Vance shrugged. "There'll be another in the morning."

The blandness of his reply goaded Kirby into taking a step toward him. But then the girl laid a hand on her father's arm, saying quickly, "Please, Dad!" And Kirby, his baleful glance holding Vance's for one more second, picked up the suitcase and made for the stairs.

Now Vance could see what Rita Kirby was like. It came as no surprise to find her looks striking, for he remember her mother as being a handsome woman. The daughter had all of the mother's charm, and more. Yet the delicate pattern of her features was strangely the least interesting thing about the girl's beauty. It was the eyes, of a brown so dark they were almost black, that gave her face animation and a look of possessing a strong reserve of character. Those eyes met Vance's quite openly now, they were alive and full of an unmasked interest as she came across to them, to him.

"Has anyone warned you that Dad nurses his grudges, Mister Vance?" she asked, an amused glint in her eyes.

"No. But thanks for telling me. I'll remember."

She looked at Tom Demmler then, and there was a sudden warmth and gentleness in her expression as she asked. "You're staying tonight, Tom?"

"Thought I would."

"Then could I see you in the morning?" She waited for his nod and, giving Keely a brief smile, she said, "Good night, gentlemen." And she followed her father.

Keely said, "Now that whiskey," and he and Tom and Fred turned into the bar.

Some minutes later, after an awkward inval of casual talk, Keely bade them good night and they ordered a second glass. Vance was suddenly remembering he hadn't terval of casual talk, Keely bade them good counter where the apron presently set a plate of food before him. And as he started eating Tom Demmler eased away and with a broad smile took his measure of his friend's high-built frame, drawling, "Brother they ran to some out-sizes when they put you together. But don't count on your size in this affair. Jim Kirby's big, too. Bigger."

"He's always been big, Tom."

Demmler laughed in that infectious way Vance had always liked. "And for as long as I've known him always buckin' a Vance. Well, here's to the Vance luck being what it always was." And he emptied his glass.

Presently Vance wolfed down the last of his food and pushed the plate away to say, "Only one thing didn't add up tonight, Tom. You and Kirby together in the same room."

"Things change, man." Demmler's look was a guilty one. "But now that you've tripped us up, I can tell you he came to see me six months ago with the peace-pipe. Because of you."

"What did I have to do with it?"

Demmler lifted his hands from the bar, let them fall again. "Everything. Kirby wanted this lease and knew you'd balk. Milt would've balked then, too. So Kirby wanted me to go to work on Milt. If I could persuade him, then maybe we could ease the lease through without your kickin' over the traces. I told Kirby you were sure to get red-headed but he convinced me it was worth a try."

Vance was eyeing his friend so soberly, so bleakly, that Demmler protested, "Sure, it looks like an underhand trick now. But there was Stirrup goin' to hell, you were off somewhere and didn't give a damn about the place, and I figured I wouldn't be stepping on your toes. So I went ahead. Between us, Kirby and I were going to carve up the outfit. I played along with Milt till things were ripe. Only it turns out now they never were ripe."

"How did you 'play along' with Milt?" Vance's voice was toneless.

"Used Kirby's money and paid off a few of his debts. Nursed him into thinkin' the senator didn't have horns and a tail."

"But throwing in with Kirby, Tom! I don't get it. Your old man would turn in his grave if he knew."

"So he would." Demmler was dead serious. "But remember what they say about beggars. If I can use that graze east of The Springs I make a good living. If I don't I'm just another man runnin' a two-bit brand."

Vance was looking down at his hands

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

folded on the counter before him. "Then there's the Kirby girl."

"Rita? What about her?"

"You tell me, Tom. Or don't, if you'd rather not."

"There's not much to tell—yet." Demmler picked up his glass and drained the last few drops from it, adding in an edgy voice, "Maybe I'm going against the blood lines, Fred, but I think I love her."

A slow expression of smiling wonderment crossed Vance's face. "Forget the blood lines you lucky devil!" He slapped Demmler on the shoulder. "Well I'll be double damned! You can certainly pick 'em. Go after her, man!"

Demmler shook his head, looking embarrassed. "I haven't asked yer yet. But one day I'm going to. Lola even likes her."

"Lola?" Vance guiltily remembered, wishing now he had thought in the beginning to ask about Tom's sister. "How is she? Married?"

Demmler's look was uneasy, "Yes. Or she was, rather. To a tramp that treated her like the dirt under his feet. She got rid of him, got a divorce."

"I see," Vance said quietly, understanding that there was something strange here. He was grave once more as, seeing that Demmler was about to add to what he had already said, he waited. But then abruptly Demmler glanced up along the bar, his look became disgusted and he said, "Here we go again! Hard Luck Hurd himself." And hardly had he finished speaking when Milt Hurd stepped in alongside Vance.

"Like old times, eh?" Hurd said in a genial voice thickened by drink. He was obviously well under the influence. "Fred and Tom and Milt hoisting one together. It's my turn, boys." He tossed some silver to the counter and imperiously beckoned to the apron.

When the bottle was set before him he was very solemn in pouring the drinks. He lifted his glass. "To the old days," and downed the raw whiskey at a gulp. Then as they drank theirs he looked up at Vance with an eye squinted. "Let you in on something, Fred. A sure thing. Remember that stretch of alkali off by Turnbull's?"

Vance nodded.

"Well, sir, there's a man from back East that salted a patch out there with some powder. His own special formula, understand? Then he planted some timothy seed. Damn me if the stuff wasn't up finger-high in less than two weeks!" He leaned closer, lowering his voice— "Now with three thousand between us, you and me we can go to this jasper and get a deed for ten thousand acres along with enough powder to salt every bad patch in our piece. Barber Creek is off there and we could dam it up and have one of the——"

VANCE'S shake of the head cut him off and after a slight pause he asked querulously, "You don't thing it'd work?"

"It might. But not for me, Milt. To begin with I don't have the money."

"But this is a sure thing. Get the money! Get it from Kirby and Tom here."

Again Vance moved his head in a negative and now a subtle change rode through Milt Hurd. He stood straighter and his eyes came bright with anger. Quite suddenly, unexpectedly, he snapped, "All right then. You can damn' well whistle for my John Henry on Tom's lease! I won't sign!"

Vance smiled in a way that lacked any trace of amusement and Hurd said sharply, "I resent this, Fred! It's become a point of honor with me that you don't trust me!"

Vance's pale blue eyes were appraising the man coolly. He was aware that men to both sides of them had stopped talking and were watching, listening. And when he spoke it was to say ever so softly, "Milt, get away from me!" He hesitated, then added, "I mean it. Now!"

Milt Hurd opened his mouth to speak, closed it again. He seemed to shrink within himself in that moment as, deliberately, he turned and started out across the room.

He had taken three strides when he stopped abruptly and turned to them again. "Remember," he said loudly, "I don't sign that lease." And with that he wheeled around and made for the street doors.

Tom Demmler breathed a gusty sigh and shook his head, his look sharp with anger. "The poor damned sponge! Why can't they pickle him and put him away?"

Vance said nothing and, noticing his preoccupation, Demmler quietly added, "I'll be going, Fred. If you're around in the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

morning come on out to the place with me. Lola would skin me alive if I showed up without you."

"Then I'll see you out there, Tom."

"You're not staying here tonight?"

Vance shook his head. "No. Thought I'd drift on out and look the place over, stay there."

"Kirby's crew may not let you in."

"That's got me worried." Vance smiled meagerly. "Which reminds me. Where's Josh Hawks?"

"Josh?" Demmler chuckled. "No one's called him anything but plain Hawks for years. You might look at the cabin up Squaw. He's been trapping loafers and now and then bringing down a wild horse. You know Hawks, always on the prowl." His glance fell away, then lifted again. "Forgetting what Milt said, do you still feel the same about my lease?"

"Why not?"

"Well—you can't say I've played exactly square with you."

"You didn't know you'd be stepping on my toes. Forget it."

"You really mean that?"

"Sure. Now run along to bed."

"What if Milt won't sign?"

"He will, dont worry."

"Wish I could be as sure of that as you are." With that dry comment Demmler turned away, adding "See you in the morning then."

VANCE stood watching his friend until he was out of sight through the lobby doorway, grateful for this pleasant interval even though Hurd had spoiled the end of it. There was something so solid about Demmler—his square-built frame, his honesty and straightforwardness—that Vance found himself genuinely pleased over the lease arrangement. Old Demmler had been a touchy, perpetually sour man and he was glad now that the son was having a chance to break out of his shabby heritage.

Milt Hurd was of course the main one to blame for the way things had gone tonight, for even having brought him down here, Vance was thinking. Yet he understood how Milt's sodden and desperate reasoning had driven him to what he'd done. Kirby could hardly be expected not to take an advantage to get his hands on something he's wanted all these years and Vance paid him a grudging respect in realizing this. Tom Demmler was the least guilty of anyone involved, for it was a human and natural thing to want to better himself.

Now Vance idly wondered what he would do about the balance of Stirrup—or all of it if Milt Hurd refused to sign Tom's lease, which was a real possibility. In either case, should he try to lease to a cattle company? Or was it worth it to try and run cattle himself and slowly rebuild the outfit? It would be a different story than it had been with his father. A man couldn't go down into Texas any longer and gather up wild cattle or buy them for next to nothing. And Stirrup was top-heavy now with buildings and fences, corrals and lineshacks that needed constant working and repair.

But the fact remained that, lease or no lease, he wasn't giving the place up. Nor was he letting Milt Hurd manage it from here on. It didn't matter that Esther Vance's will had made generous provision for Milt in making him co-owner until his death, after which the brand would go to her son or his heirs. Milt could do nothing to stop the outfit from being worked and the more Vance thought about that the more the idea appealed. There was really nothing back in New Mexico he couldn't give up easily, nothing but a job and a few friends.

Finally, almost decided on how to go about this, he left the bar and walked out through the deserted lobby and onto the veranda. He stood there for several minutes, enjoying the coolness and the taste of a smoke he rolled idly as he looked along the street. The walks were nearly deserted, though several times he glimpsed men on their way in and out of Bill Yount's saloon. One of these he was sure was Milt Hurd and his pity for the man deepened.

He remembered then that it was seven miles to Stirrup, that it was late and that he'd better be travelling if he wanted much sleep tonight. His saddle and valise were still there by the railing and as he sauntered on over to get them he was remembering Tom Demmler's guess that he might not be welcomed at Stirrup by Kirby's crew. That made him smile and he found himself look-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing forward to this possibility of a showdown with the senator.

HE FOUND the livery yard gate open as always and his knock on the office door brought a sleepy hostler awake inside, calling to him to come on in. The man took his dollar and told him to take his pick of any animals but the sorrel and the black in the corral out back. While he was getting back into his blankets Vance took some things from the valise and, loosening the ground-sheet encasing his bedroll, pushed them in and took out his bridle and then retied the roll. The hostler sleepily said he'd look after the valise.

Back in the corral beyond the long rank of carriage-sheds and the barn, Vance had a hard time picking a horse because of the blackness. But after catching up the likeliest looking animal, a bay, he put the bridle on and led him on over to the rail by the barn, where he had left his saddle. He was lifting the saddle when he caught a slur of sound hard to his left and looked around.

He had barely gone motionless when he saw a man's indistinct shape moving in on him. He heaved the saddle high and threw it, at once hearing the man's grunt of surprise as it collided with him. Then suddenly a driving weight slammed against his back and as it brought him to his knees a blow struck him alongside the head to lay a blaze of light before his eyes.

He tried to roll away and the hard thrust of a boot grazed his shoulder. As he came to his knees he saw this second one closing on him and dived at his legs. And as they piled back against the side of the barn his chest took punishment from a lifting knee. But then he was on his feet and slammed a hard blow in at the man's waist, throwing his weight forward to keep his opponent pinned there, lifting his head hard to catch the other in the chin.

The man cried out hoarsely as his head hit the boards. Vance drew back and threw one vicious punch. Again his adversary's head banged the building. Only this time he didn't cry out, his shape going all at once loose and falling.

Vance sensed the first man coming at him now and wheeled a split-second too late. He took a hard blow in the neck and, choking for breath, lifted hands to cover his face. Twice, a rock-hard fist number his right arm before he caught his breath and managed to stagger clear. He struck into the blackness, felt his blow glance off a shoulder. He swung again and this time connected solidly, feeling his knuckles bruise flesh.

Then as he swung a fast uppercut at the vague shape he missed and lurched off balance. An instant later came the pound of boots going away. His horse shied at something and a moment later the starlight let him see a thick shadow climbing the alleyside poles of the corral.

He forgot that one then and walked over to where the other had fallen, reaching out with a boot to feel at the base of the wall. Nothing was there. He struck a match. It showed him only the bare, straw-littered ground. Then off at the edge of the light some object threw a deep shadow and turning over there he found a hat lying in the dust. It was dirty gray, soiled through at the brim's inner edge and bent out of shape.

His neck was throbbing and he had the hat in hand as he walked on back to get his saddle and lift it onto the horse! Then, about to toss the hat away, he abruptly changed his mind and folded it, pushing it in under one thong that held the blanket roll. He had little doubt as to where he could find the owner; it would be interesting to notice which of the senator's crew sported a new hat within the next few days. He wondered how to set about returning it.

Presently, as he led the horse on across and opened the alley gate, he was seeing how strong his luck had been. They'd had every intention of giving him a sound thrashing and now his impulse was to ride up the street to the hotel, rout Kirby out of bed and tell him to have another try. But then a better idea came to him.

Half an hour later when he came to the forks in the road leading north toward Stirrup, he kept straight on northeast into the hills.

JOSHUA HAWKS was a light sleeper. Toward midnight he roused at the sound of hoof-falls lifting faintly over the creek's

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

steady racket. He had his reasons for being curious over the comings and goings of riders along this canyon so now wasted little time in pulling on his boots, reaching the carbine down off the nails over the double bunk and letting himself out the shacks' rear door. Below the wall corner a thicket of alder flanked the stream. He was out of sight in the shadows there when shortly a rider left the trail on the canyon's far side, waded his horse across the creek and climbed the knoll toward the line-shack.

Whoever this was reined in some fifty feet away and shouted, "Anyone home?"

Hawks knelt there frowning. That voice had a faintly familiar ring. But try as he would he couldn't place it. He decided to wait.

The rider, a tall, wide shadow in the starlight, presently swung down from the saddle. But his shape told Hawks nothing except oddly to remind him of the way John Vance used to look, long ago.

"You there, Josh?"

It took that one word to bring a whoop of sheer amazement from the old wolfer. He broke through the thicket's edge with such a racket that Vance's horse shied and pulled at the reins. He came running up to Vance, dropped the Winchester and took him by the arms, shaking him. "By God, it is! You lanky no-good maverick!"

Vance was grinning delightedly. "Maverick no longer, Josh. I'm home again."

"Not for good?"

"For good."

The old man was stunned, his expression one of disbelief. Then finally the full import of what Vance was saying struck home to him and he breathed wonderingly, almost prayerfully, "No!"

Vance nodded. "Gospel truth, Josh. Let's sit ourselves down and I'll tell you about it."

Much later, after they had brewed some coffee and Vance had talked himself out, he leaned back in his chair and yawned. "Now it's your turn," he said, nodding to the shack's single window where a blanket hung over the glass. "Why that? And why were you waiting out there primed for trouble?"

"Just more of the same you been tellin' me, Fred."

"Kirby?"

Hawks nodded. "Last week they sent a man up here to tell me I had a week to move on out. This bird mentioned the lease and said from now on they'd do their own trappin'. Maybe Bill Childers didn't have anything to do with it. I wouldn't know, but he's always been agreeable. Anyway, my times up tomorrow. Today, that is."

Vance's glance ran around the small room noting the pots and pans nail-hung over the stove, a stack of fresh-cut wood, some of the wolfer's personal effects lying on an up-ended box below the window. "You'll have to hurry with your packin', if you meet the deadline."

Josh Hawks only snorted and now Vance reached across to the bed for the gray hat, the one he had found in the livery yard. The wolfer had earlier identified it as belonging to Mel West, one of Kirby's Box riders. Now Fred looked down at it speculatively, trying to decide something. And Hawks was wondering what his thoughts might be but knowing better than to ask. This big serious man still awed him; he was trying to convince himself that this was the same carefree sixteen-year-old who had pulled out of here eight years ago because he couldn't get along with his stepfather, the boy he had helped raise since the day he was old enough to sit a horse.

Shortly Vance looked across at him. "You sleepy, Josh?"

"Never was wider awake. Why?"

"Feel like a ride?"

Hawks lifted a hand to run a finger across his tobacco-yellowed mustaches, eyeing Vance quizzically as he tried to read a meaning into the question. "Such as where?"

"Stirrup."

Slowly a light of eagerness came to the wolfer's eyes. "You mean what I think you do."

Vance nodded and, as though that was a signal he'd been waiting for, Hawks came to his feet. "Then let's be about it."

THEY rode away from the darkened cabin as soon as Hawks had climbed the slope and brought his horse down from the brush corral at the timber's edge. They wasted no time going down the canyon and, once out

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of it, cut southwest through the higher foothills. Twenty more minutes put them at the head of a long gentle slope with the timber falling away above and the deep grass swishing about thir horses' fetlocks running downward as far as the eye could reach. Vance drew rein presently when a pinpointed light moved out from behind a lower hill's crest.

"Kirby mentioned how the place is run down, Josh. Said it was grown up with thistles. But this looks the same."

"Not a thing's any different than it's always been." There was a dry edge to Hawks' voice. "Thistles, sure. But we've always had 'em. Kirby'd like you to think the layout's done for."

Vance sat another long moment looking toward that light before abruptly nodding. "All right, I go in first. You swing off there and come in from the far side."

Hawks reined away at once and in half a minute was lost to Vance's sight as he went on. In five more minutes Vance could make out the dark patch of cottonwoods shading the house. The light was coming from the kitchen end of the crew-quarters and he headed toward it, pulling the bay down to a soundless walk when he was perhaps two hundred yards away. He remembered the hat then and reached around and got it, tucking it in his belt at the left side.

He went straight on and around to the front of the bunkhouse, stopping there seeing now that the lamplight was coming from the kitchen window. He wasn't in any particular hurry getting out of the saddle; neither was he wasting any time. Dropping the reins he walked to the door, pushed it open and stepped inside acting as though he belonged here.

For perhaps five seconds he stood there in the blackness listening. He caught the heavy breathing of several men, heard one moaning softly, regularly. There was no way of telling what he'd bump into if he went further into the room, so he took out a match and with his left hand wiped it alight on the seat of his pants. His other hand was resting on the handle of the Colt at his thigh as he moved to a table two strides to his left.

He had taken the chimney off the lamp and the wick was catching when a voice drowsily asked, "That you, Mel?"

He grunted an answer and carefully put the chimney back on the lamp, afterward facing toward the sound of a bed creaking. Then the light suddenly strengthened and he could make out the room's details.

TWO double bunks were ranged along the back wall and there were singles on either side of the door. In the bed beyond the door a man wearing long underwear was pushed up onto an elbow, watching him. It was the man he had met at the foot of the hotel stairs back there in town tonight, Bill Childers.

They eyed each other soberly a long moment until Childers finally spoke a cautious word. "Well?"

Vance backed away from the lamp toward the bed to the other side of the door. Glancing briefly down, he saw that the man on it was asleep. He looked back at Childers then and reached down to a corner of the bed. He lifted it suddenly, turning it on its side. The man there rolled to the floor, thrashing in his blankets and cursing sleepily.

Childers was sitting up now. Vance pushed the overturned bed out toward the room's center as the man he had so rudely wakened came to his knees, wanting to know, "What the hell goes on here?"

There were only two others in the room, each in the lower of the double bunks. They were stirring now and Vance's look shifted between them and Childers and the other, who now came to his feet and backed toward Childers.

When he was sure that they were all well awake, Vance reached to his belt for the hat and tossed it across between the bunks. "Which one of you belongs to that?"

No one said a word.

"Go on, take it, West," Vance drawled. "How's your face?"

The man in the nearest double bunk unthinkingly lifted a hand to the left side of his face, quickly let it fall. And now Vance could see the swelling along this one's cheekbone and the heavy shadow of a bruise under that eye.

He heard a small sound outside now and

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

instantly edged in behind the door. Shortly it swung back and Josh Hawks came in. He held a .30-.30 loosely in one hand and Vance was the last man he saw as his glance ran round the room. He grinned wryly, nodding his approval. "Nothin' out there."

Vance was watching Childers now. "Were you the other one?"

"Which other one?" Childers' voice was toneless.

"Two of your men jumped me at the livery in town tonight. West was one. Who was the other?"

Childers' puzzled glance swung across the room. "What's he trying to say, Mel? When did you get in?"

"Half hour ago."

"You heard what he said. Is there anything to it?" All at once Childers' look sharpened. "What's wrong with your face?"

When West made no reply, Childers snapped, "Talk, damn it! Who helped you jump Vance?"

West gave Vance a sullen look. "Red. He stayed in town."

"Why'd you do it?"

West gave a spare shrug. "We'd taken care of the boss's trunks and Red went up to see if the boss wanted anything else. He come back with this story of the lease bein' no good because of Vance. We had a few drinks. On the way up from Yount's we saw Vance headed for the stables. So we—well, who the hell said we couldn't rough him up a bit?"

Childers' look swung to Vance now, his eyes revealing little of his thoughts. It was obvious he wasn't going to add to what his crewman had said.

"Better get some men you can keep a halter on, Childers."

Vance was trying to prod the man into losing his temper. But Childers had a cooler head than he'd counted on and said mildly now, "Boys will be boys. But get to the point. What do you want?"

"I thought you knew. Your lease doesn't hold. You're moving out."

"I take orders from Jim Kirby, no one else."

"This time you're wrong. You're leaving. Now."

The man who had been rolled out of bed said, "You can't—" before the muzzle of Josh Hawks' carbine lifted sparely, motioning him to silence.

"We can't what?" Josh asked. After a moment he hefted the Winchester once more. "Well, somebody move! Time's a wastin'. Pack your duds, boys. Stirrup's the wrong side of the fence for you from now on."

West and the man in the bunk next to him were the first to get out of their blankets. Then the one on his feet came across and began rummaging under the mattress lying on the floor. Childers sat watching for perhaps half a minute; then, his expression betraying nothing of his thoughts, he got out of bed and pulled on his pants. It was then that Vance crossed over to turn one of the chairs at the table around and sit with his arms folded over its back. The others were making a lot of noise as they gathered their things together, now and then speaking in sullen undertones.

All at once Vance saw the man standing in the doorway.

He didn't know how long he had been there, hadn't heard him approach. He simply looked across and saw him, noticing at once the gun hanging in his hand. And at about the same time Josh Hawks saw him and deliberately set the Winchestear against the wall, his move warning Vance to be careful.

"Now what's goin' on, I wonder?" the newcomer drawled, startling the others even more than he had Vance and Hawks.

He moved on in until he could lean back against the doorframe. He was short-coupled with a barrel chest and bowed legs. He looked to be crowding forty with graying mouse-colored hair. His eyes were a warm brown. He was mild-looking in every way, even with the drawn Colt. Yet now Vance abruptly caught the glint of lamplight from a nickel star pinned to the pocket of his open vest and hastily revised his judgment of the newcomer's capabilities.

"Goin' somewhere, Bill?" The law man was eyeing Childers.

Kirby's foreman tilted his head in Vance's direction. "He says we are, Sheriff."

The sheriff's lazy glance swung around. "Are you Fred Vance?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Vance nodded.

"I'm Ben Sayers. What is this, an eviction?"

"You might call it that."

The law man nodded sagely. "They told me something like this was liable to happen. You just get here?"

"Just." Vance was wondering why Sayers was talking chiefly to him.

The law man lifted his Colt, looked down at it, let it drop to his side again. "They say you really told Kirby tonight."

Vance said nothing and after several second the sheriff drawled, "And Milt Hurd."

There was still nothing to say, so Vance simply sat there watching the man, judging him, knowing something was to come. From what he had so far seen of this Sayers, he knew he was a man to be respected.

The sheriff nodded now. "Yep, they say you told Milt off and sent him away from the bar there at the hotel with his tail between his legs. You didn't happen to follow him, did you?"

"No."

Sayers' brows lifted. "No? You didn't follow him on down to Bill Yount's and wait outside for him?"

"I didn't."

The sheriff gave a slow shake of the head. "Is that so? Because somebody did. Somebody with a gun that killed him as dead as he'll ever be. Vance, it looks like you're under arrest."

II

THE morning was bright and sunny and Rita decided to walk from the hotel to the station. There was, by some miracle, plenty of time. It was only eight-thirty and the train wasn't due till nine-ten. She wanted to stop on the way at Mrs. Parker's for a beaded bag the seamstress hadn't been able to finish until late last night but had promised to mail today. As it turned out she met her on the way to the post-office with the package.

Going on toward the station she opened the package, took out the bag and after an amused glance at it dropped it in the big leather purse she carried under her arm. Sight of that dainty and utterly feminine thing turned her thoughts to the trip East, to the opening of the house in Washington and, honest as she always was with herself, she admitted now that she wasn't looking forward to a return to that life. She knew without taking any pride in the realization that she could long ago have had her pick of many of the men whose life was bounded by the limited confines of the diplomatic and legislative circles; she knew also that none of them suited her with the everlasting emphasis they placed on social doings, their insincerity and their lack of strong independence and self-sufficiency she had been brought up to expect in a man.

This train of thought shortly brought her face to face with her father's future and a wondering as to just what it might be. She frequently marvelled at his insatiable ambition and now was one of those times when she asked herself just what limit he had set for himself. This trip home had been for the double purpose of oiling his political machine and directing Box's move onto Stirrup. Throwing cattle and a crew inside Stirrup fence before the lease was an accomplished fact was typical of the way the senator did things. He was already picking his department heads in anticipation of this summer's announced resignation of the Secretary of the Interior, dead sure that he was to be named to the post.

Now that he had struck a snag in one of his bold moves she was almost hoping that he would strike one in the other. Lodgepole range was her home and she had outgrown the excitement and curiosity over living anywhere else. Everything that meant anything to her was right here, bounded by the high line of peaks to the north and east, the tawny slopes to south and west.

Thinking of these things she was oddly reminded of Fred Vance, and became at once amused and halfway angry. It amused her to recall how quietly and stubbornly he had defied Jim Kirby there in the hotel room last night; it irritated her to thing that the man would dare stand in the way of something as reasonable as the Stirrup lease. The place was run down, her father had after all gone in there on Milt Hurd's promise and it seemed absurd for Vance to blow hot again the coals of an animosity

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the years had so completely cooled. He was a stubborn man.

Still, she was thinking as she turned from Main Street down the lane leading to the station, Vance was acting within his rights and what he intended doing with Stirrup was strictly his own affair. If her father and Tom had overstepped—

Tom! she thought guiltily and stopped at once, remembering.

She started back for the street ashamed of having forgotten him. Her every minute this morning had been crowded; a hasty breakfast, packing her overnight things again, then the nuisance of having the clerk bring her word that her father was delayed and that she would also have to see to getting his things to the station. No wonder she had forgotten telling Tom last night that she wanted to see him this morning, though now she couldn't recall exactly what had prompted her to go up to him and say what she had. All she recalled was a strong impulse of wanting a closer look at Fred Vance and of using Tom as an excuse for that.

Turning back onto the street now she saw Tom on his way down the hotel steps. She was too far away to call out to him and was relieved to see him go to the tie-rail and mount his big bay, a magnificent animal with a chest blaze of white. He swung astride the bay and started this way and as she waited there at the corner she was feeling a glow of pride in thinking of him as the man of her choice.

He looked strong and solid in the saddle, his rather heavy frame in tune with the quiet strength she had discovered in him; and suddenly it struck her that if she had one good reason for disliking Fred Vance, Tom Demmler was that reason. After all these years of hard, simple living that had been Tom's heritage from his father, he'd stumbled onto a rare opportunity in his share of the Stirrup lease. Vance had spoiled that chance for him and it gave Rita a turn now to contemplate the bitterness and galling disappointment this failure might work in him.

And now there stirred in her one of the few doubts she'd ever had as to the real basis of her affections for Tom Demmler. How much had sympathy, pity perhaps, influenced her in her liking for him? Hadn't both of these emotions played a real part in her defiance of her father in the beginning when he reminded her in his bigoted way that all Demmlers were a shady lot? Hadn't she set out to prove how wrong he was? Now that she had proven it, her father having gone so far as to make Tom his partner in the Stirrup lease, she was faintly annoyed at feeling so sorry for Tom because his luck had gone back on him.

But if this was any real doubt it troubled her only momentarily, for shortly he saw her standing there and lifted a hand and she waved back to him. He used a touch of the spur as he presently swung the white-blazed bay in to the walk's edge and as he stepped aground the smile she gave him was radiant, realizing as she was how much a part of her happiness he had become lately.

"I was coming back, Tom. In all this rush I'd forgotten."

"Fact is I wasn't sure I'd get here myself." His good-natured grin forgave her, though it was short-lived as his expression turned serious. "They're all down there working Vance over. I hated to leave."

"They're what? Who, Tom? What about Vance?"

He looked around and saw that her surprise was genuine. "You didn't know Fred had been arrested?"

"Good heavens, no! Why?"

"Milt Hurd was shot last night. The senator certainly must have known about it first thing this morning."

"Dad was gone before I was awake." Shock gave her voice a low pitch. "They think Fred Vance did—killed Milt?"

"They think so, yes. But he damn' well didn't, Rita!" Tom's look was grim, furious. "I argued with Ben Sayers till I was blue in the face. All he does is listen and nod and say, 'We'll see.' The old fool! Next election we'll—"

"Tom, you're defending Fred Vance?"

"Of course. Why shouldn't I?"

"After what he did last night?"

"After what he did! What he did was give me that lease."

"But I thought—"

"He still won't take the senator's offer. My end's all right. But lease or no lease

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fred is all wool, Rita. Not a yard wide, but two. They can't do this to him!"

For several steps she was trying to get her thoughts straight and when she next spoke there was a slight edge to her voice. "Who would 'they' be, Tom?"

"I honestly don't know. But someone's framed this killing on him, although he's got a weak leg to stand on."

"A weak leg? How?"

"He claims he left town around ten and rode up to that line shack on Squaw Creek where Hawks has been hanging out. Hawks swears Fred got there around midnight. Hurd was killed close to half-past eleven. Which means Fred couldn't have done it."

"Then why was he arrested?"

Tom slapped the rein-ends savagely across his open palm. "Who's going to believe Hawks? Sayers had heard about Fred and Milt having a set-to and about the lease being cancelled. So he played a hunch and went straight out to Stirrup. Fred was there moving the crew out, had just arrived. That made it look bad."

"Moving our men out of Stirrup?"

Tom nodded seriously. "A couple of them had jumped him here in town earlier, tried to give him a beating. It made him sore so he went out there."

Rita was trying to take all this in and having a hard time of it. She said the first thing that came to mind. "Dad didn't know anything about the beating. That wouldn't be his way."

"No one blames Jim. The thing just happened and Fred wouldn't take it."

They were coming in on the wide platform alongside the express office now and Rita led the way across there to the platform's edge. The worry on Tom's square face made her say gently, "If he's innocent then it'll all come out all right, Tom. Stop worrying."

"Wouldn't you try and help your best friend?"

"He's not your best friend." She was trying not to be impatient with him. "You haven't laid eyes on him in years."

He shook his head and turned away, dropping the bay's reins and with a visible effort forcing himself to smile as he faced her again. "This is spoiling our goodbye, Rita. I didn't want anything to spoil it."

"It's not going to be for long, Tom. Somehow, I'm going to talk Dad into spending the summer here. Washington's so hot you can't believe it."

He was hardly aware of what she was saying as he turned a thought over and over in his mind. She noticed that indrawn look and said, "Something else is worrying you."

He smiled guiltily. "Maybe it is, Rita."

"Anything you can tell me?"

His glance avoided hers now and he thrust his hands in pockets, then took them out again in a nervous gesture that made her laugh softly. Then, because she understood how shy he was at times, she hazarded a guess. "Is it about us, Tom? You and me?"

He nodded, his look grateful. "I was just wondering if I dared mention something."

She had helped him all she could and now a sudden intuition in her reversed their positions and she was the one to be feeling an inexplicable embarrassment.

Tom must have sensed this, for when he spoke his words were halting, disconnected. "I was thinking that now—with the lease a sure bet, things are—well, different. If I have any luck next year, buy and sell right, then I—"

As he was speaking Rita had noticed a rider coming along the lane and had gone tense, knowing an interruption was imminent and wanting Tom to finish before it came. But now he heard the horse walking up on them and turned, his words breaking off.

It was Bill Childers. He looked down at them and touched his hat to Rita, reining his gelding to a stand close by. "Don't throw anything at me for the word I'm bringin', Rita. But it's another false alarm. The senator says you're to come back to the hotel. I'm to bring the trunks along."

"We're not taking the train? What's happened, Bill?"

"Vance."

"What about him?"

"Jim's had a talk with Keely. He's got a new notion on this lease and is stayin' on here. Must think he can do more good here than back East right now. Anyway, the trip's off."

Rita looked helplessly at Tom, shaking

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her head and saying in a small voice, "The least you can say of Dad is that he never lets things get tiresome. I'm sorry, Tom."

"I'm not. This is a break for me."

"What I meant was that I'm sorry you didn't get to finish what you were saying."

He was confused now by the presence of a listener and glanced briefly at Childers. "It can wait. It was only because you were leaving, Rita. Now there's plenty of time."

"Time for what?"

She knew what he had been about to say and he understood that and said gravely, "I want to be sure about this. Dead sure."

Childers cleared his throat, reminding them that they weren't alone. "You'll have to give me those tickets on the trunks."

Rita found the express checks in the pocket of her coat. And as she handed them up across, noticing how ill at ease Tom was, she wondered how long it would be before he again reached the point of asking her to marry him.

LODGEPOLE'S jail and sheriff's office made up one front corner of the county courthouse that sat in a small square dividing the town's residential and business areas. The building was of rock, shaded pleasantly by cottonwoods and poplars, and was given some distinction by an inset balcony across its second-storey front and a high belfry, both of these being painted white and relieving the otherwise drab look of the structure.

The jail itself was as good as rock and steel and sturdy oak could make it. A steel grating ran its width two thirds of the way between outer and inner walls, this space in turn divided by another series of bars to form two cells. Set in the rock wall of the narrow aisle fronting the cells was an oak door with a small barred opening in its face at head height. The jail was gloomy, there being only one small opening near the ceiling on the outer wall, this too barred by inch-thick steel.

Now as the lock on the door grated and the heavy panel swung open, the strong sunlight slanting in from the office window made Fred Vance squint. He eased up off the near cell's creaky cot and eyed Ben Sayers' thick-middled shape as it moved through the opening.

"Finished eatin'?" the law man wanted to know.

Fred nodded down to the heavy dishes and cup and saucer stacked neatly on the floor at the front of his cell. "Long ago. Any news?"

Sayers shook his head, sorting through his keys and finally selecting one which he inserted in the lock of the steel grating. "Not much. The doc found the bullet and brought it in. She's out of a forty-one."

That was Ben Sayers' way, leaving it like that. He had Fred's gun and he knew it was a .41. Now as he turned the lock he lifted his chin, indicating that Fred should move further back. Then, when Fred did, he opened the door and grunted as he stooped to pick up the dishes. Although he didn't seem to move fast it wasn't five seconds between the two turns of the key that left the cell as he had found it.

"So it was a forty-one. How many like that would you say there are around town, Sheriff?"

"Must be all of fifty. More maybe."

"Then it doesn't prove a thing."

The law man shrugged. "It's evidence."

"Look Sheriff, if you want evidence, send a man out there to the layout and have him look above in the meadow for sign. A good tracker could follow that hired horse all the way up to the cabin along Squaw."

"May do that myself when I find the time."

"When you find the time." Fred breathed a long sigh, trying to be patient. Then he remembered something and as the law man was going back into the office said, "If you see Tom Demmler around, tell him to stop in."

Sayers nodded and swung the door shut.

Stretching out on the cot again and staring into the gloom, Fred reached absentmindedly to his shirt-pocket for tobacco. But then he caught himself and brought his hand away empty. His mouth tasted as stale as his thinking had gone. There wasn't any use in his trying to make sense of anything. Milt Hurd was dead, killed by a bullet that could easily have been fired by his Colt; there were witnesses to his argument with Milt in the hotel bar last night; there was the solid motive of Milt's death

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

having made him sole owner of Stirrup; no one would listen to Josh Hawks because they knew he'd lie his head off for the son of the best friend he'd ever had. This was one sweet mess.

Just to have something rational to think about, Fred turned his mind to the problem of winding up his affairs down in New Mexico. He'd have to write Strickland and tell him to get a new man to run his layout. He owed something like thirty dollars to the general store in Magdalena. He'd ask Strickland to sell his three horses, pay that bill and send on the rest of the money. *Nothing else?* he asked himself when he'd sorted that out. No, there was nothing. He could break off from that life without a single regret, not one. His roots down there hadn't struck so deep after all.

Try as he would he couldn't help wondering about Milt's dying. Perhaps it was a quirk in his thinking that had made him discard from the beginning any idea of Jim Kirby being behind the shooting. Kirby had every reason to resent Milt's deception in regard to the lease. But to use a bullet on a man, to shoot without warning as the killer had done, wasn't Kirby's way. It followed, then, that Milt had made another enemy. He hadn't been able to think who this might be; nor had Sayers. "Milt was just too confounded harmless for anyone to waste time hatin' him," was how the law man had put it.

The time dragged heavily and presently Fred dozed, then slept, waking to see the late afternoon light dimming in the small window at the top of the back wall. He sat up and ran a hand through his hair, then rolled a smoke because of nothing else to do. There was a pail of water by the cell's door and after another minute he went across there and, leaning over, emptied the dipper over his head. The water was lukewarm but it brought him wider-awake.

He was dropping the dipper back in the pail when the lock on the outer door rattled.

It was Tom Demmler. Sayers, before he shut the door on Tom, said "Give it a kick when you want out."

Tom stood in the narrow aisle after the door had closed and shook his head. "He's a trustin' old boy. Took my forty-five and my knife. Felt of my pockets. Maybe he thinks I was bringing in a hacksaw."

Fred had unknotted his neckpiece and was drying his face with it. "Anything new, Tom?"

"Nothing good."

"Josh around?"

"Haven't seen him. But Kirby is. He's called off his trip. I'd give a dollar to know what he's up to."

"I'll take your dollar. He's going to stay on Stirrup. Which is why I wanted to see you."

As Tom stared in at him soberly, Fred turned to toss the wet bandana to the cot, asking, "Any ideas on where I could pick up two or three good men to work for me?"

"I'll look around. They say Walt Stevens is on the loose. He'd be one possibility."

"I said good men."

Tom frowned. "What's wrong with Walt?"

"He's no hard-case."

Abruptly a look of understanding crossed Tom's face and he said softly, "Do you want that kind!"

Fred nodded. "The tougher the better."

"To take over the layout from Kirby?"

Again Fred nodded. "To take it and keep it."

The other sighed deeply. "That's a big order, friend. Unless you want me to ride up Summit way and have a look."

Summit was a dreary, half-deserted cluster of buildings near the top of the pass road almost at timber-line, the haunt of rustlers and men who did their travelling by night. Remembering that, Fred said, "As good a place as any to start."

"What can you pay?"

"I'll leave that up to you. But I want men, Tom. That kind. The sooner the better."

"Suppose I find you some. What do they do, wait around till you're out of here?"

"That's about all they can do. But I won't be here long."

Demmler's slow nod and his grave look made Fred add, "Once you've done the hiring you're out of this. You can tell Josh about it. Between the two of us we'll manage."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'll go up there tonight. Anything else?"

Fred thought a moment. "If you can find some flowers, send some to the funeral for me. No card or anything like that."

"They're burying Milt tomorrow morning at ten. He was a Baptist, you know."

Fred grinned wryly. "Maybe that's why he took so easy to the liquids."

"Maybe so." Tom wasn't amused. "You're sure about this other, about wanting to tie into Kirby?"

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"I only wanted to know. Because this puts me on the spot."

Fred frowned uncomfortably. "Because of Kirby's daughter?"

"That's it," Tom admitted with a rueful smile.

"You're to stay clear of this. I'll look out for myself."

"Hunh-uh! You've tossed some luck my way so I back your play, whatever it's going to be."

Fred's glance softened. "We'll see. Get goin' now and let me know how you make out."

Demmler turned and kicked at the door, and presently, as it opened, he gave his last word. "Got a couple of ideas already. I'll let you know."

Out in the office he took his .45 Colt and clasp-knife from the desk. Behind him, Sayers said, "Y' know, he don't strike me as being the kind to hide in an alley and let a man have it in the back."

"Then turn him loose, Ben."

The sheriff chuckled. "I'm not that convinced."

Tom sauntered on out into the courthouse hallway, spoke to a man coming from the office opposite and went on down the steps to the street. He looked at his watch, saw that it was five-twenty and decided to eat. Forty minutes later he left town on the bay horse and headed up the pass road.

It was eighteen miles to Summit and he took nearly four hours riding the distance, not wanting to get there too early. When he did turn into the widening of the road that ran between the pines and saw the cobalt shadows of the ramshackle buildings ahead, he rode straight for a particular one and came aground in front of it by a broken tie-rail. His bay was well trained so he dropped the reins, stepped around the rail and crossed the rotten plank walk.

A stranger to the settlement would never have bothered pushing open the door in the building's boarded up front the way Tom did. Once the door swung back a feeble rectangle of lamplight flooded briefly out across the walk. Tom went in, closing the door quietly behind him.

Shortly he came out of the building with a man shorter than he and much slighter. This one's face made a narrow pale pattern in the starlight and as they talked he assumed a spraddle-legged stance, hands on hips, the dead stub of a wheat-straw cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth.

He listened to all that Demmler had to say and afterward asked, "What's in it for me?"

"Nothing but wages as far as Vance is concerned, Jeff."

Smiling crookedly, Jeff Spane drawled, "You wouldn't come all this way just to offer me sixty a month."

"No. You've played this game before. Follow your nose."

"So that's it!" Spane said softly, speculatively. "How many head would you say Kirby's run in there?"

"Around a couple hundred he claims."

The smaller man whistled softly, obviously interested now. "How many of us would it take to swing it?"

"Three on the inside is all Vance wants. You know best about the other end. Only Vance isn't to know about that."

Spane deliberated that a moment, then asked, "Beginning when?"

"Right away. Move in on Childers tomorrow night if you can."

Spane's head came up. "Bill Childers?" His narrow face shaped a wry grin and he said feelingly, "The more I hear of this the better it sounds. But why tomorrow if Vance is locked up?"

"Why wait? Vance may change his mind."

"It'll take some hustlin' to make it that soon."

"Don't you want it?"

"Hell, yes, I want it!"

"Then take your bunch in there and play it rough." . . . Tom ambled on out to

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the bay . . . "As rough as you can without burning any powder. Get men you can keep in line."

"I'll keep 'em in line," Spane drawled.

"Another thing. You'll probably be taking your orders from Hawks soon. Know him?"

"The wolfer? I know him." Spane's tone was dry, biting.

Tom swung astride the bay and was turning away when Spane said worriedly, "This Kirby now. He plays for keeps. This is a bigger game than the others you've asked me to sit in on, friend."

Tom brought his horse to a stand, looking around at the man. "Losing your nerve, Jeff?"

Spane visibly stiffened. "Don't be so damn' touchy! I'll be there."

Tom came back down the mountain faster than he had climbed it and shortly after midnight turned the bay into his Cross D corral.

SOMETIMES he would look the place over with a critical, disdainful eye and tonight this was the way he saw it, the four-room cabin with the swayback porch he hadn't bothered fixing, the sideless barn with the meadow-hay spilling down over the roof of the wagon-shed, the downward narrow bay of the small meadow crowded by the pines. He hated the timber most because it had become a symbol of the throttling dreariness of this high country that didn't give a man room enough to move cattle around in, that brought hard winters and short summers and nothing but a struggle to make ends meet.

That was his mood as he went into the cabin's main room. He had lit a lamp and thrown his hat and coat onto a chair when he heard Lola moving around in her room; and thought bitterly, *Not tonight!*

This thought was purely defensive and was remotely associated with his contrary annoyance over the neatness and bright color he saw all about him in here. This room was like the rest of the house, not including his own which he had pretty well succeeded in keeping Lola away from except for the making of the bed. She had the same passion for orderliness as for making ends meet no matter how few the dollars might be. The buckskin-upholstered settee was typical of her ingenuity; she had patched all four worn corners exactly alike, lacing them with rawhide so that the patches looked as though they belonged. She used calico flour-sacking for curtain material and her party dress was the one their mother had been married in, made over of course.

Sometimes a feeling of guilt and a realization of his shortcomings would keep Tom busy for a day or two at the endless chores he'd neglected about the layout. But those times were rare and didn't last. Normally he did only what had to be done and let the rest go.

So he made the best of it when presently his sister's door opened and she came into the room. She was holding a bright blue wrapper about her slender small body and she smiled him a welcome as she reached up and brushed back a loose strand of her lustrous red hair. She looked relaxed and sleepy, her face placid, and he told himself, *She's damned good looking, anyway,* as she came over and kissed him on the cheek.

"You're late, Thomas. Can I make you some coffee?"

"No. Think I'll turn right in."

"I looked for you last night and stayed up with that new catalogue until almost one. They show a pump in there for only twelve dollars. Do you think you could get me one for the kitchen?"

"I'll get to it one of these days, Sis," he said wearily.

All at once a thought took the sleepy look from her eyes. "You've seen Fred!" And at his nod she asked, "How is he?"

"Fine. Still the same. Bigger. He asked about you."

She went to the settee and sat with a leg tucked under her, patting the cushion beside her. "Come on, tell me all about him."

He wanted nothing so much as to go to bed, knowing her, he came across and sat facing her. "To begin with, they've locked him up," he said bluntly. And at her look of amazement he began telling her about last night and today, Lola now and then interrupting with a question.

When he had finished she was staring at

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

him speculatively, in a way that made him ask, "Now what's wrong?"

"Nothing, Tom. The lease is the best thing that's ever happened to us. And I'm glad someone's helping Fred."

She had a way of putting a double meaning to her words and now he sensed she was doing that and it annoyed him. "You're asking why it has to be me? You're saying I was wrong in hiring Spane for him?"

"You got him what he asked for. No, I didn't say you were wrong." She spoke quietly and with what sounded like a trace of irony.

"Then you're thinking of Rita," he said defensively.

Her brows lifted and he wasn't at all sure she wasn't smiling inwardly, "You're putting words in my mouth, Tom."

He came suddenly up off the settee and pacing between it and the door, hands thrust in pockets and his lips set in a firm, thin line. And she was watching him with that same disquieting look.

"What's Jim Kirby ever done for me?" he asked all at once.

"Nothing, Tom. Nothing except include you in the lease."

"But who cinched it, fed Milt his booze and thawed him down?"

"You did."

He was staring at her coldly, his temper really on edge now. "Do I just forget what Kirby did to the old man because of Rita?"

She was a long moment giving her reply and as it came there was no change in the probing glance she had fixed on him. "We all have our problems, Tom. That's yours. Mine was Ralph."

"Ralph was no good. He was another Milt Hurd."

"So I left him." She was calm, unruffled in that way so typical of her.

"Then you want me to call it off with Rita? I don't dare step on the senator's toes? Hell, girl, I'm only helping a friend!"

"Who is fighting Rita's father? You or Fred?"

IN A gesture of exasperation he picked up his hat and tossed it to the table so that it skidded off and dropped to the floor. Then he was looking at her again, speaking in a normal tone for a change. "Why must you always take it upon yourself to be my conscience, Lola?"

"You've done all the talking, Tom. I've simply listened."

He was getting just as far, exactly as far with her as he usually did and now he saw that he would only be the loser in continuing this pointless argument. He shook his head wearily and sauntered over to the door of his room, stopping there to look back at her again. "If you're up early, wake me. I'll have to go in and tell Fred how I've fixed things."

"I'm having to go in in the morning. Why don't I tell him? There's plenty you could be doing here."

"So there is," he said dryly, resenting her reminder of the countless things he'd neglected. "All right, I'll sleep late."

When he had slammed his door Lola sat staring after him in that same speculative way. And presently she was asking herself, *I wonder what it is he really wants?*

She thought she knew, and the knowing wasn't a pleasant thing to think upon.

LOLA drove the buckboard in to the foot of Lodgepole's main street just short of noon the next day and decided to do her errands before stopping at the courthouse. She was looking forward to seeing Fred Vance, for her memories of him were pleasant, even a little exciting. But it had become her habit to be deliberate about anything concerning her emotions—Ralph had taught her that—so she decided to finish her errands first and began at the dry goods store and went from there to the restaurant to eat lunch.

Sidney Connover found her there and sat at her table a few minutes, presently asking if she would enjoy going with him to the Corlett's cabin-raising. He was one of the few young men around who had seemingly forgiven her her unfortunate marriage, he would one day take over his father's hardware business and ranch, he would be quite a catch. Still, after smiling at him in a way that might or might not have meant anything, Lola told him:

"You'll have to let me see how things work out, Sidney. I'd have to stay in town all night."

He seemed grateful for even that much

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

encouragement and when he had gone she paid for her meal and then walked on down to the feed mill to see what sort of a trade they would make on wheat for some baled meadow hay off the ranch. Tom should be doing this, but there was an unspoken agreement between brother and sister that she was the best bargainer. So she used her feminine wiles and some of her charm on old Harry Wilson and by the time she left he had not only agreed to the trade at her terms but had mentioned the church supper next Wednesday night. As a deacon he reflected the town's feeling and she was comforted by that; they were forgiving her.

It was past three when she brought the last of the bundles out from the Emporium to the buckboard and then walked over to the courthouse. And now that the moment for meeting Fred was at hand she had a queer feeling of uncertainty, almost of shame over what he might think of her. Did he know about Ralph? How much had Tom told him?

But as she opened the door to Ben Sayers' office her pride bolstered her and her uneasiness quieted.

The room was empty, a thin curl of smoke from a burned-down cigar in a can lid on the desk telling her of recent occupancy. And a feeling of keen disappointment struck through her.

She was turning to go out when she noticed the small door inset in the face of the jail entrance. It was closed. She went across there, twisted its latch and found that it came open. Set in the head-high rectangular opening was a steel grating, beyond it blackness.

"Fred?" she called hesitantly.

She heard a sound from in there. "Who is it?"

"Lola. Lola Demmler."

"Of course. Now I know you." His deep-toned voice sounded pleased, eager as he added, "Get Sayers to let you in."

"He's not here. Before he comes back there's something Tom wanted me to tell you, Fred. He's arranged everything with a man by the name of Jeff Spane. Spane will be at Stirrup tonight with his men."

"Tonight?" Fred asked. Then he decided it really didn't matter that Tom had changed the plan, that his men would go in without him, and added quickly, "Fine. Is this Spane a good man, Lola?"

"You didn't want a good man, did you?" She smiled knowingly to remind him how grown up, how wise she had been even in her girlhood. "Spane has a bad reputation. Does that answer your question?"

He chuckled. "Sounds like he's exactly what I need," he drawled, their talk touching only the surface of his thoughts as he stared across studying the face framed by the lighted opening in the jail door. Lola made a pleasing picture there, the sunlight behind her giving her face a gentle, perfect outline and high-lighting her coppery hair. And from some remote corner of his memory there came alive a quickening interest in this sister of Tom Demmler's.

"This was something I was forced to do, Lola." he told her.

"I understand. Perfectly."

"I'll keep Tom out of it. Don't worry about that."

"I won't, Fred." A look of tenderness came to her now as she went on, "You've given us something we never dared hope for."

"Forget it. We old timers have to stick together." Fred gave way to an impulse then, saying in a half-joking way his memory told him she'd understand, "You're prettier than ever, Lola. What's the matter with the men around—"

As he caught himself, knowing he had said the wrong thing, Lola told him quietly, "There was a man, Fred. Something went wrong."

"It must have been his fault," he said lamely.

Just then the awkward moment was broken as the hallway door opened. Lola turned from the door to find Ben Sayers entering the office. When he saw her surprise took the slackness from his face.

"Well, hello, Lola!" he said cordially eyeing the opening in the jail door. He reached for his keys. "Here, I'll let you in."

"There's no need, Ben. I'm going to have to leave or it'll be dark before I'm home." She turned to the opening again. "Goodbye, Fred. Next time in I'll bring some cookies. Or a cake."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Next time you won't find me here," came Fred's answer.

"He'll be here," Sayers grumbled in mock-severity. "You just bring along that cake."

She said goodbye to Fred again and Sayers opened the door and came out into the hall with her.

"Is it really as serious as it looks for him, Ben?"

The sheriff sighed gustily. "At times the case against him looks mighty thin. Then I add it all up and it holds water. I just don't know. Kirby's clapped another warrant on him, and you know the senator."

"Yes, I know him." She forced a smile. "Well, I have to be going. I was serious about bringing him that cake. Tell him so."

"I will."

After she had gone, Ben Sayers went into the office and made himself comfortable in his swivel chair. There was a Cheyenne paper he hadn't finished reading. He had barely settled down to it when someone came into the office.

LOWERING the paper he saw big Jim Kirby standing there, a cigar jutting from his mouth at an upward angle. And, since he was quite aware politically, Sayers at once came to his feet.

He was about to say hello when Kirby cut him short. "Ben, I want to talk with Vance. Out here where I can get a good look at him."

"Well, now. I don't know." Sayers didn't much like the proposal but didn't want to offend Kirby in any way. "You'd be responsible, of course. It's your warrant we've got on him now."

"Then bring him out here."

By the time Sayers had opened the jail doors and Fred was coming into the room, Kirby had taken the swivel chair. "Sit down, Vance." he ordered gruffly.

Instead of doing that, Fred crossed the room and leaned back against the broad, hip-high sill of the open window. Sayers looked momentarily alarmed but decided to keep his mouth shut.

Kirby was scowling at Vance. "Leave us alone, Ben."

The sheriff's eyes opened a trifle wider. Then with a shrug he went to the door. "Remember what I said. He's your lookout."

"I'll remember."

After the law man had gone out Kirby drew deeply on his cigar and as Fred regarded him impassively he reached to his vest pocket to take out another. "Smoke?" he asked," he asked, offering it. But Fred only shook his head. So Kirby laid the cigar on the desk, remembering he hadn't offered Ben one.

The shaft of sunlight shining around Fred made a heavy fog of the smoke and only now did Kirby realize that he had been out-maneuvered, sitting as he was facing the light.

This was what put an edge of irritation to his voice as he abruptly announced, "Vance, I'm not here to argue whether you did or didn't kill Milt. The court can decide that. My private opinion is that it's good riddance. Milt Hurd was as no-account as any man I've ever had dealings with. I hope you'll be different."

When Fred still had nothing to say, Kirby became uneasy. You couldn't argue with a man unless he talked. Or maybe the time hadn't yet arrived for arguing. Kirby decided to make it arrive.

"You own all of Stirrup now, Vance. Your say goes. We've made a bad start, you and me. But I take it you've got some of your father's brains. Use them now on this lease. If you'll—"

"No, Kirby. You don't get a lease."

"Now wait!" Kirby lifted a hand. "Wait'll I've had my say. Maybe it's the price you object to. All right, we'll talk price."

Fred coughed, waving a hand against the smoke. "It's not price," he said and, half turning, lifted the lower sash of the window higher.

Kirby took careful notice of that move as he reached over and put his cigar on the edge of the desk. "Then what is it?"

"The layout's not for lease. Or for sale. It never was."

"You might get three thousand dollars, even thirty-five hundred a year from a cattle company. Suppose we begin at thirty-five hundred."

"That's your offer?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kirby nodded.

Fred shook his head. "No dice."

"Four thousand then."

This time Fred didn't say anything, only shook his head.

Kirby's face reddened and he burst out, "Vance, you're a fool!"

The faintest trace of a smile came to Fred's eyes. He shifted so that his side was to the window now and lifted one boot to the sill, folding his arms over his bended knee as he sat and leaned back against the frame.

Kirby watched that in a knowing way. "Just try and make a break for it!" he said softly. "Go on, try! Fall out through the screen. You might make it around the corner before I could get my gun out. Maybe you could make the back street and get on a horse, get clean away. Go on, try it!"

That hint of a smile on Fred's face became real now, for it was as though Kirby had read his mind. "Maybe I will," he drawled. "But why should you want me to?"

"So I can hunt you down. So I can get rid of you."

"So you can get Stirrup, you mean. You've always wanted it. You thought you had it until last night."

"I'll still get it."

"How? Not by killing me."

"I'll get it through the courts."

Fred laughed.

"You think I won't?" Kirby's eyes went narrow-lidded now. "Today, not four hours ago, I turned that lease with Milt's signature over to Keely so we could bring suit against you."

"They'll turn it down."

Kirby was smiling now in a pitying way. "Son, do you know how long a man can keep a case in the courts if he wants? Years. Three, five, seven years, who knows? I'm delaying every possible way. You can't last that long. You'll go broke and I'll win my case. Unless, of course"—and he paused significantly—"they hang you for murder and save me the trouble."

"You don't even have a case against me, Kirby."

"Which brings up another point," the senator said smoothly. "I'm in no hurry to bring you to trial. I'd just as soon they postponed it till the next term of court. That's sixty days from now. Then when they do get around to trying you, Keely can stall. It might take two or three weeks. All this time I'm on Stirrup and you're here. There's not a blessed thing you can do about it."

Fred thought that over and shortly nodded. "So I guess I'd better take the other way."

"Which way's that?"

"The way you just said. Get out of here."

Kirby smiled. "Try it."

"Or," Fred drawled blandly, "there's still another—"

He lunged then, throwing himself sideways and out. He was falling against the screen before Kirby, intent on his words, started reaching under his coat for the gun at his armpit. Fred looked back over his shoulder as the screen gave way and saw how close it was to be.

He landed on hands and knees after the four-foot drop to the ground. He heard Kirby's bellow, "Ben!" and threw himself in a diving roll for the corner of the building. Then as his shoulder hit the ground Kirby's gun blasted at the window and a spray of brick-dust from the building's foundation-corner hit him in the face.

He lunged to his feet and ran as hard as he could the length of the building, hearing shouts from the front as he made for the walk at the edge of the back street only twenty feet away. Two horses were at the tie-rail beyond the walk. The sorrel was the biggest, so he chose that one. He ducked under the rail, jerked loose the reins and swung up into the saddle, turning out into the street.

He was bent low over the sorrel's neck and the animal was at a full out run when the explosion of a single shot echoed after him. That bullet kicked up a geyser of dust thirty feet behind his horse.

At the edge of town he cut wide of the road and headed fast up the near hillslope into the pines.

(*Part II in the next SHORT STORIES*)

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

. . . . *Hand in Glove With a River Pirate*

RIGHTFUL OWNER

By MERLE CONSTINER

IN THE last days of the eighteenth century the lower reaches of the Ohio were ravished by a certain Meason, a voracious land-and-river pirate. Eventually the thrust of frontier pushed him south to the Natchez Trace, where he was joined by terrible Little Harpe, and met his just end, but that is another story.

Mid October, 1797, a young man travelled the wild river road on horseback. His name was Rice Andrews, he was a lawyer from Philadelphia, and he had in his wallet two letters, one from a Miss Bella Shacklett rhapsodizing rather intimately over the memory of a militia ball back East, and one from an elderly barrister accepting Andrews, on approval, as a junior partner.

Both letters were from a village called Peytonville, beyond the Wabash.

Out of Cincinnati he'd put his valuables beneath his saddlecloth, and from Indian Creek on he'd ridden with his travelling pistol under his thigh. A few miles west of Pigeon he'd been caught off guard on his belly drinking from a roadside brook, by an owl-eyed, bandy-legged little man in a red velvet vest and a tattered shooting jacket—but the fellow proved to be a peddler hawking Paisley shawls, and nothing came of it. It was about ten o'clock, on a black overcast night when Rice Andrews reached Peytonville.

A dry wind, almost a gale, was threshing the empty village streets, creaking the shop signs. Three shaggy farm horses huddled in the yellow blotch of a tavern window. It was a larger settlement than he had expected, a half dozen shops, perhaps, and

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

about twenty cabins and houses. Across the rutted road, in the dim light of the tavern, he could make out the swaying sign: *D. Shacklett, GENERAL STORE.*

Here at last, he thought.

The building was L-shaped, the shop fronting on the street, the house proper adjoining it on the rear, at right angles, with a little yard and porch facing the sidewalk. It was a corner building and the board sidewalk, coming down the street, passed the house, suddenly going into a flight of steps to a slightly elevated platform—the store porch—and descending again at an angle around the corner. Like a stile. The store was dark but the parlor window showed soft lamplight. The parlor door opened and a young man stood revealed boldly in the doorway.

He was tall and bullish, in a tight-bodied coat—and much too young to be Uncle Douglas, the merchant.

Bella was with him on the doorstep, and she was weeping.

Rice Andrews, in the shadows, frowned. It wasn't exactly a lovers' spat. He could feel something of that in it, but there was something else, something more.

The young man in the tight coat said a gallant goodnight. Brusquely, as though he were about to walk a hundred miles, he strode to the sidewalk, tipped his hat in a final farewell, and climbed the steps to the platform. Then, leisurely, he took a key from his pocket and entered the store. Out of Bella's sight, but scarcely ten feet away.

Bella closed the door.

From his saddle, Andrews stared through the store window.

The man had lighted a candle and was sitting at a desk, going through account-books. He seemed completely at ease and his hands, enormously big and calloused, riffled papers which were obviously private.

Confused and angry, Rice Andrews dismounted and entered the tavern behind him.

The innkeeper welcomed him boisterously. "So you're the young gentleman betrothed to Miss Bella Shacklett? Mr. Tryon's new junior partner? Well, you surely come at the right time! Glad to have you in town. You're to live with Mr. Tryon, you know—" He looked solicitous. "You'll eat light and fancy, sleep cold, and maybe grow fur, but son you'll really learn law!"

THE house was in a grove of maples at the edge of town. It was a story and a half, of new peeled hickory logs, but its slab-framed window panes were of finest English glass. A servant led Andrews down a narrow resinous hall to his bedroom under the loft stairs. Halfway through a sponge bath he was brought a silver tray with a very small thigh of cold chicken, two small biscuits, lightly buttered, and a huge decanter of superb Madiera. Refreshed, he went out into the house and was shown to the library.

Ranked with musty books, this was Mr. Tryon's law office. A whale oil lamp fluttered on a scarred workdesk and a small fire (a very small fire, Rice Andrews thought) smoked in the fireplace. The room, the whole house, was on the brink of chill. Mr. Tryon arose and thrust out a firm bony hand in greeting.

He was wispy, and unbelievably ancient. His imported cutaway coat had a mustard lining and his boots were polished to mirrors. Skin was tight across the dome of his skull and fell in folds about his stiff high collar, as though time had melted him like tallow.

When introductions were over, and formality had softened, Mr. Tryon brought out a saucer of almonds and candied citron. Where did these come from, Rice Andrews wondered? However did they get here? How long has he saved them for this occasion?

Mr. Tryon said gravely, "Sir, we are environed by trouble."

Rice Andrews waited.

"These are bad days," the old man said. "Meason on the outside, on the river and roads. And now this Shacklett business."

"Shacklett?"

"Mr. Douglas Shacklett, Bella's uncle. He's got himself arrested on suspicion of homicide. You'll have to postpone the wedding."

Wedding. The innkeeper had him betrothed, Mr. Tryon had him almost a groom. After a moment, he said, "Homicide?"

"Yes. Not long ago a peddler came to town hawking shawls; everyone saw him. A few days later boys found his clothes in an open grave, in a cabin by the river. Found his clothes and also a rawhide strangler's noose."

"A grave inside a cabin!"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"A fresh grave in an abandoned cabin owned by Mr. Shacklett."

"The grave was empty?"

"Yes. They reason Shacklett changed his mind and tossed the body into the river. The clothes were positively identified."

"Fiddle-dee-dee. In the first place, with no body—"

"I know." Mr. Tryon smiled thinly. "But this is not Philadelphia, sir. This is wilderness. Peytonville objects to murder and would like an explanation."

Abruptly Rice Andrews stiffened. "Paisley shawls? Was he selling Paisleys? Was he a little owl-eyed man?"

"He was, yes."

"With bandy legs? I met him on his way out! Sixty miles east. He's alive!"

Mr. Tryon was gently amused. "Ah, sweet romance. Owl-eyed and bandy-legged, and sixty miles away." There was sympathy and comradeship in his dry smile. "If you undertake the defense, I'd suggest less personal evidence, sir. Goodnight, and rest well."

RICE ANDREWS rested well indeed. His mattress was of Russian leather and his feather bolster was soft and billowy. He breakfasted with his host on the flagged back-veranda; through the trees the distant river glowed in smoky mist. Take a few days off, Mr. Tryon had said, learn your way around.

Rice Andrews thanked him. He put his napkin in its ring. "Who is the man," he asked, "who is tall, young, with a bull neck and a tight coat? Does he work at Shacklett's store?"

"Hardly!" Mr. Tryon looked surprised. "That's Joey Null, hammerman to the blacksmith. An obnoxious penny-peacock." He paused, chose his words with care. "I believe him to be a Meason man. I'd like to know for sure. Why do you ask?"

Andrews told him of Null's entry into the store.

"Searching for powder and shot," Mr. Tryon decided bleakly. "Powder and shot for Meason."

But he hadn't been searching for powder and shot. He'd been reading Shacklett's ledgers.

Rice Andrews arose. He was a slight young man in rumpled black narrowcloth. His hair was untrimmed and his necktie was carelessly looped. He said quietly, "We'll see."

HE WAS thinking about Bella intensely as he walked down the rutted road. Friendly townsmen nodded and smiled their welcome and dogs thumped their tails against the boardwalk as he passed. He was thinking of that militia ball in Philadelphia, of the pretty little country girl who had been Bella, and how they had fallen in love. He'd been a troubled man from then on. He crossed the street at the tavern, climbed the steps to the store porch and entered. He wondered if it would turn out to be just infatuation.

He'd soon know.

The room was long and dim, with a rough hewn floor. To his right, just within the door, were three great barrels, cider, whiskey, and molasses, on a rack of sycamore poles. Beyond, in the half-light, he made out a counter with bolts of cloth, shelves of hardware and queensware. Bars of pig iron lay stacked against the wall and the air was pleasant with the smell of leather and dried apples. Bella was standing by the stove, waiting for him.

His eyes met hers and he knew this was the real thing. Intuitively, with something of a shock, he realized that she, too, had wondered.

She said simply, "I'm glad you're here, Rice."

He could think of words, but he couldn't say them. After an instant he took a cameo ring from his wallet. She watched him slip it on her engagement finger. He said gently, "I came last night but you had company. Joey Null."

"Joey Null used to be a childhood sweetheart," she said. "But that's all over now, Rice. It's been over for a long, long time."

He nodded. Outside a wagon jolted by, and a farmer cracked his whip. "The first thing, as I see it, is to get your uncle out of jail. It shouldn't be too hard. The whole thing's absurd. Did he own a red velvet vest and a ragged shooting jacket?"

"Yes. They're hanging in the woodshed behind the store."

"Not anymore, they're not. I saw them sixty miles east of here, on the back of a peddler. A peddler hawking Paisley shawls.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There's been no murder, of course. I can swear to that. But we can't use it."

"Can't use it?"

"They wouldn't believe me. Because of you. But we won't need it." Rice Andrews paused. "Just what happened?"

She thought for a moment. "I'll try to tell it just as it unfolded. One Thursday afternoon a hawker came to the store. He had these shawls and we don't see real Paisleys back here. They were beautiful. Uncle Douglas bought me one and I left. There was no one in the store then but Uncle Douglas and the peddler. No one in town saw the peddler after he left the store. I went into the house and laid my shawl away in a chest."

Rice Andrews listened in silence.

"About a week later," Bella Shacklett said, "I wore my shawl on the street. Mr. Evans, the mayor, asked me about it. I told him what I've just told you." She looked suddenly wretched.

She said, "That morning they'd found the grave by the river. I hadn't heard, they'd kept it from me. They'd questioned Uncle Douglas and he'd absolutely denied having seen any peddler at all."

"Then they arrested him?"

"Yes. It turned out that other folks had seen him with the peddler, too, had seen him through the store window. He denies this, too, denies it furiously."

Rice Andrews was stunned.

"But why?"

"I don't know."

"I'll talk to him," Rice Andrews said at last. "I'll find out."

"I doubt it," Bella Shacklett said. "My uncle is a strange man."

MAYOR EVANS was in his backyard, playing with his ten-year-old son. The mayor was red-faced and fat, in faded blue linsey; he was instructing the youngster in the proper method of throwing a tomahawk, expounding on the relation of turns to distance. The little boy, in breech clout and leggings, had lost interest but the mayor, carried away by zeal, was slapping the weapon out, time and time again, in unerring marksmanship against an oak thirty feet away. Rice Andrews came around the corner of the courthouse and introduced himself. He said he'd like to talk to Mr. Douglas Shacklett, and see the evidence, too, if it was permissible.

The mayor gave him a cordial handshake and led him into the kitchen. From a chest he took a patched jacket and pantaloons, the peddler's clothes, and a noose of rawhide. It was a garrote, all right, there was no doubt of that.

The mayor replaced the articles and closed the chest. "It's that strangler's noose we don't much like," he said mildly. "A garrote is a rogue's weapon. A pure-and-simple murder weapon. A pistol, now, or even a butcher knife, can be weapons of defense—but when a man sits down and fashions himself a strangler's noose he's thinking of murder."

"Is Mr. Shacklett a rogue?"

"No, no! He's a gentleman, and easy in his circumstances. But somebody made that noose. And Shacklett sticks to a lie."

"What is your personal—?"

Mayor Evans pursed his lips. "Peytonville thinks it happened this way. This peddler comes to Shacklett's store. He sells Miss Bella a shawl, and she leaves. Now the peddler is alone with Shacklett in the shop. Aha, he says to himself, a very nice place to rob! Out comes his strangler's noose, he's on Mr. Shacklett like a bobcat, and Shacklett downs him with a bullet in the heart. A terror comes over Shacklett, he takes the body out and dumps it in the river. It's justifiable homicide, self defense. We wish he'd admit it."

Mayor Evans shrugged. "It's just that we want to know," he said doggedly. He pointed to a door by the fireplace. "He's yonder. Go in, if you like."

Andrews walked down a short passage and came out into a log-walled room. The jail. A partition of heavy timbers ran down the center of the room, and centerway in this partition was a door of quartered oak banded with flattened wagon rims, inset with a small barred window. The place was bright with morning sunlight.

A man peered through the grating. His gray hair was neatly brushed, his gaunt cheeks carefully shaven. He studied his visitor with hostile, red-rimmed eyes. "So you're Rice Andrews," he said. There was scorn in his voice.

"I'm Rice Andrews," Andrews said. "And I'm here to get this nonsense straightened

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

out. But I'll need your help, Mr. Shacklett."

Mr. Shacklett looked amused.

"They have no case at all," Andrews said earnestly. "They simply want an explanation. They've caught you in a falsehood, sir."

"I saw no peddler, I know nothing about a garrote. I know nothing about a grave, nor any clothes."

The conversation was obviously closed. "Is there anything I can get you?" Andrews asked at length. "A bottle of Madiera, perhaps?"

"I'm very comfortable."

"Food?"

"I eat from the mayor's table."

"Nothing, then?"

"Nothing at all. I'm very happy."

Rice Andrews bowed, and left. He tried to hide his anger.

ABOUT three that afternoon Rice Andrews was in the bar-parlor of the Red Lion when Mr. Tryon came in. The old lawyer laid his gold headed walking-stick on the buckhorn gunrack above the door, gazed benignly about him, and joined Andrews at his table. After a beaker of red Tent wine, Mr. Tryon lighted a cigar and called the innkeeper's son to him with a crook of his finger. The boy was a hulking yokel and came with speed and respect. Mr. Tryon took a somewhat tarnished silver sixpence from his black silk purse, dropped a fleck of cigar ash on the coin, and burnished it to a mirrorlike polish with the ball of his thumb. When it was glowing like an icy ember, he laid it on the tabletop. "This is yours, my boy, all of it, to have and to hold from this day forward, if you'll hitch up your papa's buggy and take Mr. Andrews and myself for a short scenic drive through the countryside."

The boy left at a lope.

The buggy pulled up at the carriage block, they climbed in, and under Mr. Tryon's direction rolled down Main Street and out of town.

Peytonville was on the crest of a small hill. They descended the slope, passed through a dismal finger of mudflats, and came out into a brushy wood along the riverbank. Here, in an overgrown clearing, was a tumbledown shanty with a stick-and-mud chimney. Its shingles were battered and askew, and its door sagged open on its hinges. "Shacklett's cabin," Mr. Tryon announced.

They alighted and entered. The hole was indeed fresh dug. It could be a grave, Rice Andrews thought, though it was a little shallow. Outside, they gazed through the blackjacks and hazel at the sluggish river. "There went the body, in the water," Mr. Tryon said. "Or so rumor hath it. Do you like it?"

"I'd like it in Philadelphia. There's not even a corpus delicti. I doubt whether Mayor Evans ever saw a law book in his life. He has his mind on tomahawks."

"You'd be interested in tomahawks, too, if you'd been up against Little Turtle. But you're wrong. Mayor Evans, and Peytonville, has its mind on justice."

They left the buggy before the Red Lion. Rice Andrews said slowly, "I've been thinking about last night. About how I saw Joey Null in Mr. Shacklett's store. He wasn't looking for powder and shot. He was reading Mr. Shacklett's accountbooks and papers."

Mr. Tryon looked attentive.

"Null was a childhood sweetheart of Bella's," Rice Andrews said calmly. "Bella says it's all over, but maybe she's wrong. Maybe Null still has hopes, hopes of marrying a shopkeeper's niece. Maybe when Uncle Douglas was behind bars Null took the opportunity of doing a little secret bookkeeping, finding out what was what, totalling his prospects in dollars and cents. Reading Uncle Douglas' ledgers."

Mr. Tryon smiled. "It seems unlikely. I doubt if Null's that brilliant."

The innkeeper appeared in the tavern door behind them. He hitched his apron about his waist, said dolorously, "Have you heard the news, gentlemen? Mr. Shacklett is dead. His weak heart finally betrayed him. He had a seizure, gentlemen, and passed away, right there in jail."

Mr. Tryon blinked. Rice Andrews said, "My visit did it. It excited him." After a moment he added, "If you'll excuse me, sir—I'll attend to a bit of private business." Mr. Tryon watched him walk away. The old man's eyes were bright and alert.

The Peytonville blacksmith shop was at the south end of Main Street, just be-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fore the road made its downward twist to the river. Half encaverned by foxgrape and tree branches, its ramshackle sides were pieced of scrap lumber, its roof of mismatched, rotting shingles. Two men were standing in the dusk before its open doorway when Rice Andrews came up. The blacksmith, a little goblin of a man with puckered cheeks and wiry forearms, licking a chunk of loaf sugar—and Joey Null, his hammerman.

Now, in the daylight, Andrews got his first look at Null. The hammerman was about his age, with matted sandy hair and slotted animal eyes. He was wearing a greasy cowhide apron and the muscles of his chest belled his thin workshirt. He said softly, "So this is Rice Andrews, the Mr. Know-it-all from beyant the mountains."

Andrews ignored him. He said to the blacksmith, "Are you an honest man, sir?"

The blacksmith considered for a moment, said amiably, "All in all, yes. Why?"

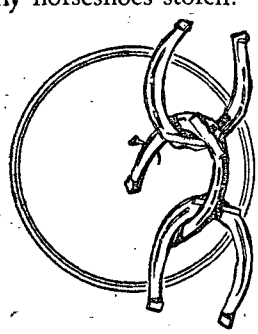
Andrews asked, "Do you hold with Meason and his robbing?"

A flush of mighty anger darkened the blacksmith's weathered face. He said slowly, "Watch your speech, son."

"I'll ask you one more question," Rice Andrews said. His voice was grave. "If I'm wrong, I'll apprentice to you for a week, twelve hours a day, free of charge. Is it a bargain?"

The blacksmith grinned. "Fair enough."

"It's this," Rice Andrews said. "Have you had any horseshoes stolen?"



The little blacksmith gaped. "Why, yes, that I have." He wavered. "Twice in the last two months. Taken from my shop, they were, at night. The first time—"

Null stepped forward and struck Andrews. He moved with wolfish speed and the blow, splitting the young lawyer's cheek, threw him sidewise again the building, to one knee. Andrews came upward in a lunge, under the hammerman's loose guard. Three times he hit him, in throat and face—and Null but grunted. They grappled. Null's great leathern apron flapped about their legs and tripped them. Then they were in the dust, locked and silent, Null groping for eyesockets, Andrews threshing, groping for a choke hold.

"That'll be enough now, boys," the blacksmith said goodhumoredly. He was holding a rusty flintlock pistol with a bore the size of a broomstick. "You've had your fun, now get to your feet. I want to ask Mr. Andrews a question."

They stood up. The blacksmith said, "What's this about horseshoes?"

Rice Andrews brushed the dust from his knees. He took a long drink from a gourd dipper at a cedar bucket. "I suspect Null is a Meason man," he said coldly. "I suspect he's been stealing your horseshoes and reshoeing Meason mounts. It's an old robber trick. New shoes are mighty important in throwing trackers off the trail."

The blacksmith said, "I'm sorry to hear it." He didn't sound sorry.

Panting, Null said, "You can't prove a thing!"

"No," the blacksmith said. "But we can sure as hell talk it over." To Andrews he said, "Good day to you, sir." To Null he said, "Jest make yourself comfortable a-sitting on that tree stump there. This may take time."

NEXT morning word ran up and down Main Street that Joey Null had left town, during the night. For keeps. About ten o'clock he'd paid his tally at the tavern, packed his saddlebags—and cleared out. Not a goodbye to anyone.

Third day after the funeral, Rice Andrews collected a small group of citizens in the mayor's office; Mr. Tryon and Bella, the innkeeper and the blacksmith, a few prominent shopkeepers and farmers.

He'd seen the peddler alive and hearty, but Peytonville would never believe the truth. Very well, then he'd give them something else. He said gravely, "Miss Bella wishes me to inform her friends that she holds no ill will for the tragic incarceration and death of her uncle. The whole thing, of course, was simply a dreadful mistake."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Beyond the adzed windowsill the October sky was apple-golden, and still. Mayor Evans cleared his throat. "The town is mighty sorry for Miss Bella. But it wasn't no mistake. Mr. Shacklett was locked up, right and proper, because he give us perjured testimony."

Most everyone looked embarrassed, but nodded in agreement.

"Before we leave this room," Rice Andrews said. "I intend to clear Mr. Shacklett's good name. For once and for all."

Mr. Tryon looked mildly interested.

Rice Andrews said, "You had Mr. Shacklett in your jail, and a grave, clothes, and a strangler's noose. You had the ingredients, but no case. Let me give you my case; it's pure conjecture on my part, but everything fits the picture. You may take it or reject it as you see fit."

He had their attention now. He said, "Miss Bella, tell us, after the event were any of your uncle's clothes missing, old clothes?"

"Yes," Bella Shacklett said. "An old shooting jacket and vest and things. They disappeared from the shed behind the store."

"We'll come back to that shooting jacket," Rice Andrews said. "But first I'd like to tell a little tale. Let us say an honest peddler is on the road selling, perhaps, Paisleys. Let us say that one night, possibly, he's encamped along the riverbank, in the brush. He hears voices and sees a lanthorn. Quietly, he investigates. It is those terrible desperadoes, the Meason gang. They are in secret consultation with a man who seems a little different, who is dressed a little differently. The peddler decamps, and leaves that place in a hurry. Say he was heard, and pursued, and while he was not caught yet his clothes and pack were observed."

The name Meason was magic. He was the focus at once of hard, particularly interested eyes.

"The peddler continues his journey. At the next town, the town of Peytonville, he has the shock of his life. There on the street, posing as an honest citizen, he meets the Meason accomplice, the man on the riverbank. Startled, he gives himself away. Terrified, he turns into a store, Mr. Shacklett's store. When Miss Bella has left and he is alone with the proprietor he reveals the peril in which he's placed himself. Mr. Shacklett's kind heart is racked with sympathy. I'll get you out of this, he says. I've some old clothes, a shooting jacket and so on, out in the shed. Wait a minute. Here take them. Go out Main Street to the north. A road leads down to the river. You'll find an old abandoned cabin. I own that cabin. There you may change your clothes, and rest, and be safe."

A skeptical frown was gathering on Mayor Evans' face.

"But it's not to be that easy," Rice Andrews continued sombrely. "Our fraudulent citizen, our local Meason man, follows. He takes with him his rawhide strangler's noose. His noose and his shovel. The peddler has just finished changing his clothes when the Meason man comes in."

Rice Andrews paused dramatically. "Comes in. And forces him, no doubt, to dig his own grave. Luckily, the peddler escapes."

The innkeeper was entranced. "Escapes?"

"Obviously. The grave was never used, was it? This is only logic."

Rice Andrews waited. The crucial moment was at hand. The narrative he'd just related was about as idiotic, he knew, as anything the mind of man could conceive. They were impervious to the truth, so he'd given them a fabrication. And made it a whopper.

Mayor Evans said carefully, "Who, my friend, is this local Meason man? Would you care to name him?"

"Joey Null could fit the picture," Rice Andrews said obliquely.

"By doggies, that's right!" the little blacksmith exclaimed. "I wasn't aimin' to make it public, but I will. Joey was a Meason man. Me and him had a little talk and he admitted it. We had quite a session, gentlemen, but he finally owned up."

Rice Andrews took a deep breath. "It's all very logical. Mr. Shacklett allowed himself to be jailed because he was shielding Bella. He was involved in a dangerous secret and wished to spare his niece from Meason vengeance."

Red-faced, Mayor Evans got to his feet. "That's good enough for me. And defending a dead man, too!" There was awe in his voice. "You got a brilliant future, son. You're going to make a great lawyer."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Alone in the room—after the crowd had left—Rice Andrews took Bella's hand, and kissed her. On the walk home neither had much to say.

ALL that day, everywhere Rice Andrews went, folks congratulated him.

That night in Mr. Tryon's study, over steaming cups of Mr. Tryon's special New Orleans coffee, the old man appeared in the mood to discuss it further. A frugal fire crackled on the hearth. Mr. Tryon said, "The mayor was right. You're a great talker. It's not what you say, but the way you say it. I've never listened to such spell-binding nonsense in my life. Actually, do you know why Uncle Douglas allowed himself to be confined?"

Rice Andrews grinned and shook his head.

The old man folded his hands in his lap. "I'll wager Shacklett was in with Null, selling guns through his store to Meason. That would explain Null looking over his ledgers, worried. Shacklett allowed himself to be locked up because he was guilty, of course. Not of murder, that hadn't come off yet, but of murderous intention. He knew Peytonville had no real case against him and preferred acting the silent martyr to revising his story. He'd already been caught in a lie. He knew he'd soon be out. And if he had just been falsely accused of one murder, who among the repentent citizens would dare accuse him of another when it occurred?"

Genially, Rice Andrews asked, "And how would you explain the grave, sir? If it was a grave."

"Oh it was a grave, all right," Mr. Tryon said. He chuckled. "And Uncle Douglas himself prepared it. Strangler's noose and all. He'd planned it down to the last detail. He'd even bought some old clothes from a peddler, to leave around as a red herring—in case the grave and its contents were discovered."

"Then the grave was for Null!"

"The grave was for you, my boy. For you. A stranger coming in and laying court to his niece? And Uncle Douglas hand in glove with river pirates? Oh, no. So he made plans. Fortunately, they blew up in his face." Mr. Tryon closed his ancient eyes. "I see no reason to mention it to Bella," he said with a great show of judiciousness.

"I won't," Rice Andrews said thoughtfully. "I certainly won't."

Beware of the One-Gun Man!

"HOW many guns do you really need?" is a question I have been asking every shooter I come across lately. A lot of these characters, like myself, have quite a number of guns.

Needless to say, I have not included outright gun collectors, as many in this category are not shooters, but spend their spare time admiring and conditioning their latest acquisition.

A typical answer to my question of the day runs about like this. "Well, let's see. First a shooter needs a light but accurate .22 rimfire for knocking marauding rabbits out of the garden, and for taking a few squirrels. Then, while speaking of .22s, a heavy target rifle is an absolute must for punching holes in the center of the black portion of certain pieces of paper. Next, is the tried and true long range tack driving job, say a .220 Swift or the wildcat .219 Wasp, for bench rest shooting and varmint work as far as you can see 'em.

"For big game, such as sheep, goats and deer at long range, the .270 or one of the souped up .270 or .30 caliber wildcats. For

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

big Alaskan bear you gotta have a howitzer that will knock 'em down and keep 'em there. The .375 H & H Magnum is just about the ticket. Also, for general work (what this includes I don't know. Probably just to keep the shoulder sore.) you want to have a good old .30-'06 handy. For shotguns and handgun you'll need. . . ." Whoa! Wait a second, let's keep it to rifles today. Besides that's about all I can carry!

Well, let's see now, according to my count you simply must have at least six rifles to take care of every day needs or any emergency that may come up—or do you?

If you are lucky enough to have a couple of trunks full of pieces of eight stashed away in the back of the closet, and have time to traipse around the country for a good portion of each year, you really do need 'em! Also, if you have that kind of dough, you'll want to go to Africa after the thickskins. That means a couple of heavy double barrel rifles—mighty pretty and might expensive!

If you are an average Joe who has the hot breath of "dat old debbil wolf" on the calves most of the time, but by hook or crook manage each year to get a week or so away from the grindstone, with maybe a few weekends thrown in, it's a different story.

One rifle will do the job, and do it well!

"How's that again? One rifle," sez you. "What rifle?"

Yep, one rifle! Here's the way I look at it. Many of us never get a chance at the big brownies. So, that lets out that big cannon the .375 Magnum. As a matter of fact, our "one gun" has, and no doubt will again take the big ones, so we will not be completely out of the picture, even on Kodiak Island, the home of the biggest bears in the world.

This single rifle may be a good .30-'06, a 8-mm Mauser (Model 98) or a .270. Discounting the above mentioned big bear and such heavy game as moose and elk, the "one rifle" could be the 7-mm Mauser, the .300 Savage, the .257 Roberts, the .250-3000 and believe it or not that 50 year old .30-40, the Springfield Krag. Remember, I am speaking of good rifles, no klucks. Such smokepoles as the Model 88 Mauser, and other weak sisters will not fill the bill!

Now let's take the .30-'06 and start with a cheap short range load that may be used with good success on rabbits and other garden destroyers just beyond spitting range.

The simplest and easiest load that I have used in the .30-'06 and the .30-40 Krag is made using the # 0 (the # 00 also works OK) buckshot. According to paper figures there are 144 # 0 and 122 # 00 buckshot to the pound. The other day I ran into a good bargain and bought five pounds of # 00. Incidentally, I got 'em from Phil Medicus, 18 Fletcher St., N.Y.C. 7, N.Y. and he tells me he will mail five pounds, postpaid for $1.75. According to the book dope, five pounds should be 610 shot. Being curious I counted them and found that I had 642 in the bag. Phil's scale must be wrong!

A good load that is quite accurate is three grains of Bullseye pistol powder (to make it easier I settled on a .22 Long rifle rimfire case full) and one of these balls pressed onto the mouth of the primed cartridge case. Some shooters dab a little cup grease on top of the ball. This is a little messy, so I just roll the balls around in a cardboard box containing a little microfine graphite. I have never gotten a leaded barrel so the graphite evidently does a good lubrication job.

The # 0 buckshot is listed as measuring .32 inch. I have just put the micrometer on twelve of them and got readings from .312 to a full .32 with an average of .3169. The average measure of 12 of the #00 was .3343, a little under the listed .34 inch measurement.

ALSO according to the book, the # 0 should weigh about 48.6 grains and the # 00 57.3 grains. This doesn't have much to do with our "one gun" but I was still curious, so I picked up a dozen of each and weighed them. The heaviest of the # 0 weighed an even 49 grains, and the lightest 47.5 grains. The heaviest of the # 00 was 56.78 grains, while the lightest tipped the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scales at 53.6 grains. The weights were fairly uniform with the exception of one light one in each group.

Besides using both sizes for the .30-'06 and .30-40 Krag, I have had good success with the 00 in a Model 98 Mauser chambered for the 8-mm cartridge. Other size shot may be used in other calibers.

Recovered fired bullets look almost conical in shape and show good rifling engraving. Too much powder would undoubtedly cause these little balls to strip in the rifling with no accuracy at all. Incidentally, they are fine for basement target practice, with suitable backstop, of course. Before shooting in your basement you'd better check and see that there is no local law agin such carrying on!

Just for the heck of it, let's figure out what these loads cost. There are 7000 grains to a pound of powder and Bullseye sells for about $2.35 per pound. Thus a charge of three grains costs about .1 cent. Primers are $6 per 1000 or .6 cent each. Figuring the shot at about $1.75 for five pounds, our #0 bullets cost .0024 cent each, or a little over four for a penny. Cartridge cases with this load may be used indefinitely, so we'll figure them for free.

Thus we have a good shooting pipsqueak load at $.00724 or quite a bit less than a cent, not as much as the cost of a .22 Long rifle cartridge—and a lot more fun.

The only tool necessary for building this cartridge is a re and de-capper.

A better pipsqueak load may be made up very cheaply using the 89-grain Luger cast bullet (Lyman mould #308244) and about 3½ grains of Bullseye powder. But more equipment is necessary. Besides the mold ($6.00) plus a lead pot and dipper, a loading tool is necessary, the least expensive being the tong Lyman #310 ($9.50 complete for one caliber) and a powder measure and scale. Although the Lyman tong tool does not cost very much, good accurate ammunition may be made with it.

Cartridges for target shooting (even at 500 and 600 yards) and for small game shooting may be made using the Squibb gas check bullet (Lyman mould #311413) and various charges of Dupont powder #4759 or #80, or Hercules Lightning.

For big game, regular factory ammo may be used. Or, with a little practice a careful reloader can make up full power loads which, adopted to his individual rifle, will better the factory ones.

Some years ago I used the .30-'06 varmint cartridge loaded by Remington with a 110-grain bullet at 3500 feet per second (later reduced to 3350 F.S.). This bullet at such high speed did terrific damage to pests. Some misguided shooters used this cartridge for deer, but the bullet had a tendency to blow up on contact inflicting a surface wound that was not immediately fatal. So it should not be used on larger game.

Probably due to being over stabilized (too fast a spin for bullet length, given by the one turn in ten inch twist of the rifling) the 110-grain bullet at very high speed is not too accurate, and due to the blunt shape its trajectory over 250 yards is not quite as flat as that of the 150-grain bullet at about 2960 F.S. In my rifle 53 grains of Dupont 4320 powder gives excellent accuracy to the 150-grain Speer bullet at under 3000 F.S. This is the .30-'06 load I have used on woodchucks and other pests for several years. It is also an excellent deer killer.

There's no point in going into reloading (the fifty-cent handbooks contain this info). But I do want to mention that I have found 48 grains of #4320 powder gives excellent accuracy to the 180-grain bullet as does 55 grains of #4350 powder. Heavier charges may be used, but it's a good idea to start low and work up, carefully checking for extracting trouble and condition of case and primer for excessive pressure. When cases start to stick, it's a pretty good sign that too much powder is being used, and it's time to back off a grain or so.

Good results may generally be obtained with 52 grains of 4350 powder behind the 220-grain bullet.

So, with a little effort one gun can be made to do the work of several. It's not only an interesting challenge, but the actual production of the various loads is a lot of fun. Also, the shooter who experiments with one gun really gets to know it, and as a result becomes very proficient in its use.

Why not get in on the fun?

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

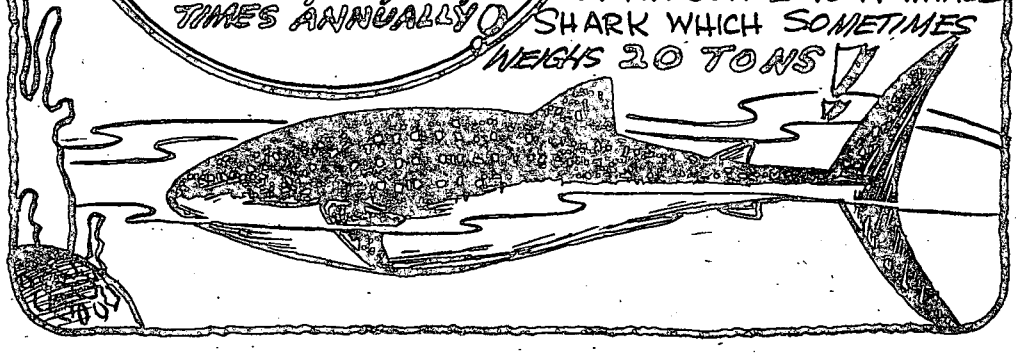
Curiosities By Weill

THE NUMBER OF SHARP ERECTILE DETACHABLE SPINES MINGLING WITH THE HAIR OF A PORCUPINE IS ESTIMATED TO BE 36,450

A TWO POUND PIECE OF AMBERGRIS WORTH $500.00 WILL MAKE 200 GALLONS OF PERFUME VALUED AT ABOUT $30,000.00

THE ANNUAL CONSUMPTION OF ICE-CREAM BY 1955 IS EXPECTED TO REACH 1,000,000 GALLONS. THE CONE, INTRODUCED AT THE ST. LOUIS FAIR IN 1904, IS STILL THE TOP ICE-CREAM NOVELTY SERVED 2,500,000,000 TIMES ANNUALLY.

FISHES VARY IN SIZE FROM THE PHILIPPINE GOBY WHICH WEIGHS LESS THAN A HUNDREDTH OF AN OUNCE TO A WHALE SHARK WHICH SOMETIMES WEIGHS 20 TONS



PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

. . . . A Killer — but Still the Boy the Detective Had Gone to School With

THE RAGGED EDGE

By PHILIP KETCHUM

THE TWO detectives stood in the darkened entranceway to a building across the street from the rooming-house. They watched a light come on through a third floor window. Ben Higgins nodded. He said, "Call the wagon, Blake. I'll go over and get him." His voice was flat, almost toneless.

"Why don't we both go over?" said Joe Blake.

"I know him," said Ben Higgins. "I went to school with him. If I go over there alone he'll talk to me."

"He might talk with a gun," said Blake. "He did to Floyd Garrison. He's a killer, Ben. Why stick your neck out?"

"It's my neck," said Ben. "I want to handle it this way. Call the wagon. Give me ten minutes."

He struck out across the street toward the rooming-house. He was a tall young man, slender. His shoulders were hunched against the driving force of the wind which

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

swept the street. His hat was pulled down tight on his head. The collar of his top-coat was turned up. His hands were in his pockets. It was early evening but there was hardly any traffic on this side street. On the corner was a cocktail bar. It was there they had spotted Tony Scarcelli. They had hardly had to move to run him to earth.

Ben stepped up on the curb. He crossed the sidewalk, moved up the steps of the rooming-house, opened the door and entered. A dim light glowed in the hallway showing him the narrow stairs to the floors above. It was warm in here, warm with the intimate smells of an old house. Just inside the door was a row of mailboxes. Tony's name was not listed.

A threadbare carpet covered the stairs. Ben climbed to the second floor and then to the third. He heard the muted sounds of a radio coming from one of these third floor rooms. In another a child was crying. Ben moved up the hall to the front of the house. He counted the doors. At the second he stopped and listened. He could hear nothing from inside the room. Ben took his hand from his pocket. He knocked on the door. After a moment he knocked again.

"Who is it?" called a voice from within the room. "What do you want?"

Ben stood close to the door. His gun was in his shoulder holster where it would be hard to get at. It occurred to him, abruptly, that he was doing a very foolish thing in coming up here alone. A trickle of perspiration ran down his armpit. He said, "Open up, Tony. It's Ben Higgins. I want to talk to you."

A moment of silence followed. Ben waited patiently. The dim light in the hallway emphasized the lines in his thin face. He was under thirty but he looked older. He felt older, just then. This was an arrest he didn't want to make. This was the toughest job he had ever had to tackle.

"Go away, copper," said a voice from within the room. "Leave me alone."

"Open up, Tony," said Ben again. "This is something you can't duck. You knew that when you shot Garrison."

AGAIN there was a moment of silence. Ben waited. He had a flashing memory of something which had happened long ago, of Tony Scarcelli on a highschool football field, crying like a baby at the end of a game which had been lost by one point.

"You alone out there?" asked Tony Scarcelli.

"I'm alone," Ben answered.

The door bolt clicked. The door opened. Ben looked in at Tony Scarcelli and at the gun in Tony's hand, a gun which covered him. He moved into the room. He closed the door and stood against it. He shook his head. He said, "Put up your gun, Tony, unless you mean to use it."

"Why shouldn't I use it?" Tony snarled. "You're just like any other copper."

"There are too many of us, Tony. You can't get us all."

Tony Scarcelli wiped a hand across his face. He was short, stocky. He looked older than Ben though they were the same age. He had dark, straight hair which needed trimming. His eyebrows were heavy. His eyes were dark, sharp, nervous. His breath was coming fast. An open suitcase lay on the floor near a bureau. It was half packed. An extra gun was on top of the bureau.

"You'll never take me in, Higgins," said Tony Scarcelli. "Never!"

"We'll take you in," said Ben Higgins. "One way or another we will take you in."

"And they'll make you a captain, huh," said Tony. "Is that it? They'll make you a captain for bringing me in. Maria will like that. She will think it's wonderful."

There was a heavy bitterness in Tony's voice. He looked at the gun in his hand. He turned and threw it across the room. The gun bounced from the wall to the floor. Tony crossed to the bed and sat down. He buried his head in his hands. He looked up after a moment. There were tears in his eyes. "Come on," he half screamed. "Snap the handcuffs on me. Be a real hero. Get your picture in the papers."

Ben still leaned against the door. He stared soberly at Tony Scarcelli. He couldn't think of anything to say. He could understand Tony's bitterness but he didn't know what to do about it. The lines in his face had deepened.

"I didn't think I'd ever kill a man," Tony muttered. "I didn't think I'd ever kill a man but Garrison had it coming. I'm glad I killed him!"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tony's voice had risen on those last words. He was staring again at Ben Higgins. His eyes had widened. There was almost a mad look in them.

"Cut it out, Tony," Ben ordered.

Tony jerked to his feet. His fists were clenched. Anger had darkened his face. It sounded in his words. "I'll not cut it out," he shouted. "I'm glad I killed him. Glad. And there's one more on my list. One more to die."

He whirled around. He moved to where his gun was lying. He stooped to pick it up. Ben Higgins stepped quickly forward. His fist chopped down on the back of Tony's skull, just above the neck. It was a sharp, hard blow. Tony gasped. He sprawled to the floor and lay there motionless.

BY TEN O'CLOCK that evening the wind had turned colder. The hint of winter was in its icy bite. It struck against Ben's face as he left the city hall. It knifed through his top-coat, as he huddled on the corner, waiting for a Twenty-third avenue street car. It snuffed out the first match with which he tried to light a cigaret. When the car came Ben boarded it, paid his fare, and stood in the back section where he could smoke. Two other men in the back section of the street car were discussing Scarcelli's capture and predicting what the cops would do to him before he came to trial. Ben tried not to listen. He left the car at Merced Avenue and walked two blocks up the street.

This was a poor section of the city. It was almost the worst. The houses were old. They were of frame construction. They were jammed close together, almost touching each other. The lawns were poorly kept which possibly was not the fault of the people living here. Years ago the grass had eaten the fertility from the soil and the people who lived in these houses had no money to waste on food for a lawn. The trees in the park put out green leaves each spring but seemed to have given up growing. There were empty spaces where some had died and had been removed.

Ben stopped in front of one of these houses. He stared at it bleakly. Light showed dimly around the front room curtain. After a momentary hesitation he turned up the walk, climbed three steps to a sagging porch, crossed it and rang an old-fashioned level bell. Footsteps sounded in the hall, a porch light came on, the door opened and Maria Scarcelli looked out at him.

She was a tall girl, taller than her brother, almost as tall as Ben. She was slender. Dark hair framed the oval of her face. She had finer hair than Tony's, hair with a soft, natural curl. She was wearing a Terry-cloth robe which reached almost to the floor and which was pinned together at her throat. The dim porch light struck across her face, shadowing her eyes, eyes which seldom laughed any more, eyes so darkly brown they were almost black, eyes which once had been warm and friendly when they looked at Ben Higgins and which had held a promise of much more. Tonight there was a cold and distant look in them.

"What do you want?" asked Maria Scarcelli.

"I want to talk to you," said Ben.

Maria shook her head. "There is nothing to talk about. I heard the news on the radio."

Ben pulled in a long, slow breath. His hands were buried deep in his pockets. On the way here he had hoped that this house would be dark, at the same time hoping that it wouldn't. He wished now that he hadn't stopped, yet he had known that he must.

"I arrested him, Maria," he said slowly. "I talked to him before I arrested him. I want to talk to you."

The girl backed away from the door. She said, "Come in," but there was no welcome in the words.

Ben stepped into the hall and into the smell and feeling of a home he knew as well as his own. He followed Maria into the parlor, a parlor which hadn't changed within his memory. Here was the same worn davenport he had sat on as a boy. The same pictures were on the walls. A piano had always stood in the corner. It was still there. The light fixtures, the carpet, the chairs, the library table and its lamp, the bookcase, all were so familiar he hardly noticed them. He stood near the fireplace in which there wasn't a fire and where, to his knowledge, there had never been a fire. He stared at Maria. She was standing. She hadn't asked him to sit down. She didn't intend to ask him to sit down.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Mama doesn't know," she said quietly. "She is asleep. I will tell her tomorrow. Was Tony hurt?"

"He wasn't hurt,' said Ben.

Maria's hands were clasped together. She was twisting the ring on her little finger, twisting it around and around and around. This was an old habit of hers.

"Floyd Garrison isn't dead," Ben mentioned. "He's in the hospital. There is a chance he might live. If he does, things will go much easier with Tony."

"He deserved to die," said Maria. "Do you know what he did? He followed Tony around from one job to another. He said to the boss, *'Tony Scarcelli can't be trusted. He's a wop. He was in the reformatory. He's got a police record. You'd better fire him.'* That's what Garrison did. Your friend, Garrison."

"He was no friend of mine," said Ben.

"He was a detective, a brother-in- arms."

"All detectives aren't fine men, Maria, just the same as all bankers aren't fine men, or all street car conductors. On the force we have our share of those we are not proud of."

"Tony tried to go straight. He didn't have a chance. He tried to hold down an honest job. He didn't have to. He could have gone to work for Nick Rossi any day. Nick Rossi wanted him. He could have made money with Nick Rossi, dishonest money, but he would have had protection from men like Garrison. He tried to go straight. He was driven to murder."

"It may not be murder," said Ben Higgins.

MARIA had stopped twisting her ring. Her hands were clenched at her sides. "I wish it was," she said bitterly. "At least it would be a clean murder, one he wouldn't have to be ashamed of. What did he tell you?"

Ben shook his head. "Nothing important. You can see him tomorrow."

"Then what do you want with me tonight?"

"You know what I want, Maria. You know what I have always wanted. This makes no difference."

"You would marry a murderer's sister?"

"Tomorrow. Tonight."

"How noble of you, Ben Higgins."

A sudden, sharp anger threw its heavy weight against Ben's patience. He took a step forward. His muscles were tense. He wanted to grasp Maria and shake her, break down the walls of her resistance. He moved closer. He reached out suddenly and took her in his arms. Her body was rigid, unyielding. He found her lips. They were cold, motionless, without form. She didn't struggle against him. Ben had the feeling that she wasn't here, that this was only her figure he was holding, that the girl he loved was far away.

He dropped his arms. He stepped back. He wiped a hand across his face and was reminded abruptly of the way Tony Scarcelli had made a similar gesture. Tony, who had been cornered and who was bewildered and frightened and confused.

"You had better leave," said Maria quietly.

Her face showed no emotion. Her voice was calm. Ben stared at her, knowing that he hadn't been able to touch her, that nothing he could do would touch her. She was as far away as another planet. He turned and moved toward the hall. He came to the front door. He opened it, stepped outside, closed it. He had no memory of the long walk home.

THEY were horsing around in the squad room, mainly riding Joe Blake whose wallet had been lifted by a pickpocket. Blake was tussling with two of the men. His beefy face was flushed from his exertions.

"Hey, look at Ben Higgins," shouted one of the men. "Even Ben's snapped out of it. Maybe he's forgotten that girl."

Ben kept the grin on his face. He said, "What girl? I'm a confirmed bachelor and everyone knows it."

"A guy with no blonds in his life," said Cassidy. "How sad."

"She's a red-head," said Mowbridge. "She's the torch gal in the Bombo Club."

"Nope," said Cassidy. "His real gal is Sophie Springer."

There were delighted howls at this. Sophie Springer weighed close to five hundred pounds. Ben had had the uncomfortable job of bringing her in on a larceny

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

complaint. She had sat down on the sidewalk in front of her house and refused to move. She had suggested that he pick her up and carry her. A newspaper photographer had been handy and had taken a picture. It had made a beautiful newspaper story.

After they were off duty, Ben Higgins and Joe Blake dropped in at the Dutchman's for a glass of beer. They talked of trivialities. They listened to the Dutchman's mournful story of the horse which should have won the third race at Hollywood Park but which lost his rider in the stretch. They had a second beer.

"Have you found her yet?" Blake asked suddenly.

Ben shook his head. "Not yet. I haven't stopped looking."

"Why don't you forget her?"

"I don't think I want to."

"Ben, you could do better than Maria Scarcelli."

"No man could do better than Maria," Ben growled. "You just don't know her, Joe."

"All right," said Joe Blake, shrugging his shoulders. "If I'm talking out of turn, kick me in the face, but since you're so crazy about her why didn't you marry her long ago before her brother got himself into trouble?"

"There was a war," said Ben. "Remember? I was just out of college when it started. The war gobbled up five years. I can't complain. The special training I got lifted me into a plain clothes job with the department here in an awful hurry. I like this work. Maria doesn't, mainly because of the way Garrison kept pushing Tony around.

"I saw Garrison the other day," said Joe Blake. "He's up and around again. I suppose he'll be back. We could get along without him."

Ben finished his beer. He stared moodily at the bar, wondering where Maria had gone. She had disappeared immediately after Tony's trial. Mama Scarcelli still lived in the old house but Mama Scarcelli wouldn't even talk to him.

"I was up state the other day on the Hodson case," said Joe Blake. "I talked to the warden. He mentioned that Tony Scarcelli had been transferred to the prison farm near Centralia. He said Tony was behaving himself."

"Tony had a rough deal," said Ben Higgins.

He stood up. He was thinner than he had been eight months ago at the time of Tony's arrest. The lines in his face were deeper. He crossed to the door and stood there, tall and thin, and slightly stooped, his weariness showing in every line of his face.

"Do you think I could get a couple days off?" he asked when Blake joined him.

"Maybe," said Joe Blake. "The chief, for some peculiar reason, seems to like you."

"I think I'll try it," Ben nodded.

Blake chuckled. "There's only one good hotel in Centralia," he mentioned. "It's called the Plaza."

SHE left the laundry by a side door at five thirty. She walked down the street. At the corner she came to an abrupt stop. She stared at the man who was waiting there. To Ben Higgins, she looked tired, older. Her cheeks were pale. Faint lines showed at the corners of her mouth. She was wearing a brown skirt, a light, tan blouse, no hat. A slight, warm summer wind lifted the dark curls from her shoulder.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I came to check up on a man," Ben said vaguely. It wasn't true. He had a notion that Maria knew it wasn't true.

"Check up on him, then," said Maria. "And when you've finished, go away."

"I'll walk home with you," said Ben.

He fell into step with her. They moved on up the street. It was a tree shaded street, a quiet street, a side street in Centralia where no streets were ever very busy. A noisy group of children were playing in it. In the front yards of the homes along the street, men in their shirt sleeves were watering the grass, cutting it, trimming it. The grass in these yards really grew. The houses weren't jammed too close together.

"The fact that I'm here," said Maria, "has nothing at all to do with the fact that Tony is on the prison farm."

Ben said nothing.

"I saw him a week ago," Maria continued. "He is going to finish his sentence. When he is free again he is going south. He is going

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

someplace where he isn't known. He is going to start all over."

Ben still said nothing.

Maria stopped. "Don't you believe me?" she asked. "Don't you think I'm telling the truth?"

"I believe you," said Ben slowly. He was looking into Maria's eyes, eyes which were dark with suspicion.

"I believe you," he said again. "I believe you but I'm wondering about something."

"What?"

"I'm wondering about us, Maria. Will we have a chance after Tony is gone?"

Color climbed into the girl's cheeks. She looked at Ben for a moment, then looked away. Her hands were clasped together. She was twisting her ring. She said, "Ben, I don't know. I can't look that far ahead." Her voice was very low.

"Maria," Ben whispered.

He leaned forward. He touched her arm. Maria said, "No, Ben. Don't. Not here. Wait until I come back to town."

"When?"

"Sometime this winter. I don't know, exactly. I have a good job here at the laundry. They have placed me in charge of the other girls. I'd like to stay for a while. It's close to Tony. He needs my encouragement. He is bitter. Sometimes what he says frightens me. I came here to get away from you. To think. Please give me more time."

A FLASH over the state tele-type one evening late in October reported the escape of eight convicts from the prison farm near Centralia. Details of the break, as they came in later, were not pretty. Three guards had been killed; two had been carried away as hostages. Within twenty-four hours, four convicts had been re-captured; two had been killed; two were still at large, Tony Scarcelli and a man named Carlos Hall who was up for manslaughter. They were reported to be well armed and to be traveling with a woman.

The chief called Ben Higgins into his office. "You know Tony Scarcelli's sister, don't you?" he said bluntly.

Ben nodded. He wondered what the chief had heard about him and Maria. He decided he didn't care.

"She's the woman traveling with Scarcelli and this fellow Hall," said the chief. "She was working in a laundry at Centralia. There's a good chance she was involved in the break. They're headed this way. Maybe they're already in the city. We're going to cover every place we think either of them might hole up. There's one other place to cover. Floyd Garrison's. I want you and Blake out there. Scarcelli might want another chance at Garrison."

"Send someone else, chief," Ben suggested. "I'd like to play a hunch of my own."

"What hunch?"

"I'd rather not tell you."

The chief was scowling. "You're not running out on this are you, Ben? You're not running out because of a woman?"

Ben stiffened. He shook his head. "I'm not running out."

The chief stood up. He took a turn around the office. He stood at the window for a while, scowling down into the street. "It had better be a good hunch," he said finally. "All right, get out. See what you can do."

IT WAS a good hunch. Ben was sure of that. It was more than a hunch. Tony had said there there was one more man on his list, one man besides Garrison. Marie had said that Nick Rossi had wanted Tony in his organization. Floyd Garrison had always been pretty close to Rossi. Those things added up. They made a clear picture. Tony had tried to go straight. Garrison had chased him off of one job after another, each time driving him closer to Rossi who could have used him, who needed men with Tony Scarcelli's bitterness and ability.

Rossi was in the trucking business but he had many other interests. He had connections in the city hall, and in the underworld. He was socially prominent and he could walk into almost any dive in town and find a friend. In some quarters he was rated as one of the city's most outstanding citizens, and in others he was spoken of as a public enemy. He was a patron of the arts, and of the artless. He was many kinds of a man.

Ben stood across the street from Nick Rossi's home. It was a large home set far back from the sidewalk. A high hedge almost hid it from view. The night was dark. A soft rain was falling. There were lights in the house. Ben had once been here to see

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Rossi in connection with another matter. He guessed that if Tony came here tonight, Tony would make his entrance to the grounds through the hedge from the side street. But he couldn't be sure of this. It would be better to watch the house from a closer point.

Ben moved to the side street. He found an opening in the hedge through which he could slip. He moved up to the house. It was dark on this side. He didn't see the two men waiting in the shadows until he was almost on them. They came at him with a rush. He blocked one blow aimed at his head. He blocked another. He stabbed a fist at a man's face. One circled behind him. Pain exploded in Ben's skull. He pitched to the ground. He didn't lose consciousness but he had lost all power to fight back. He was aware of the men's voices and of hands which lifted him and carried him inside. He heard the men talking to Rossi and heard them leave. He heard the faint sound of footsteps moving back and forth across this room where he was lying and gradually he whipped his scattered thoughts into an orderly pattern. It had been Rossi's men with whom he had fought. They had been waiting outside in the deep shadows of the house. They had brought him into this room. The man whose footsteps he heard was Nick Rossi. This room was Rossi's library, or home office, or den. He was lying on a leather couch. He could see the top of a high, L-shaped bookcase in one corner, the top of a curtained window, a tapestry on the wall above this couch. He turned his head and saw Nick Rossi.

Rossi was short, wide shouldered, heavy. His dark hair was streaked with gray. He had a fleshy face. The shadow of a beard darkened his jaw and his eyes were deep-welled and shadowed. A half smoked cigar was clamped between his teeth. He wore a blue suit, a colorful bow-tie. He had stopped his pacing and now stood half across the room, scowling at Ben.

Ben sat up. He fingered the lump on the back of his head. He was a little dizzy. He closed his eyes for a moment then opened them again.

"What were you doing out there?" asked Rossi. "Maybe an explanation is in order."

"Maybe I have one," Ben answered. "Why were your men outside? Who were they waiting for?"

Rossi tongued his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. He said, "I'll ask the questions, Higgins."

"Not all of them," said Ben.

This wasn't a large room. It held another couch, several chairs, a desk in one corner. There was a fireplace against the side wall in which a fire was burning. Two floor lamps and a lamp on the desk gave the only light. There were two doors on opposite sides of the room. One led, if Ben remembered correctly, to the front entrance hall. Where the other door led he didn't know.

"Any more police out there?' Rossi asked.

Ben shook his head.

Rossi came a step closer. He said, "Higgins, you went to school with Tony Scarcelli. You were sweet on his sister. Since you showed up here tonight I am certain of something at which I could only guess."

"You couldn't get him, could you, Rossi?" said Ben Higgins. "Even with Garrison driving Tony off of every job he got, you couldn't get your claws into him."

"Maybe you've been a detective long enough," said Rossi. "Maybe you ought to pound a beat for a while."

Ben ignored this threat. "What are you going to do?" he asked, "if Tony shows?"

"He's an escaped convict," said Rossi. "He's an armed and desperate man."

"I'm here to arrest him."

ROSSI laughed. It wasn't a very easy laugh. It had an ugly sound. He shook his head. "If Scarcelli comes here," he said slowly, "I am very much afraid he will be shot. The chief, your chief, will even praise me for saving him more trouble. Even those who might question what happened will understand my defense of my home against a mad-man."

"I am here to arrest him," said Ben.

"If you will look in your holster," said Rossi, "you will discover that you have lost your gun. I am afraid you are in no shape to arrest anyone."

The door to the entrance hall opened. A man looked in. "He's across the street," the man reported, and there was a touch of excitement in his voice. "He'll be coming in through the side hedge."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Is he alone?"

"Yeah."

"Let him get as far as the house," said Rossi. "Don't take any chances with him. Don't miss."

The man nodded. He closed the door.

"It's murder," said Ben under his breath.

"No one will call it that," said Rossi. "If you call it that no one will believe you. Sit still and listen."

Ben got to his feet. He rubbed a hand over his face. He was perspiring. He pictured the hedge outside, the lawn which ran up to the house. In his mind he could see Tony crossing the street, hesitating at the break in the hedge, slipping through it, running forward. The shadows against the house were deep. He wouldn't be able to see the men who were waiting there.

Near this davenport was an end-table. On it, two heavy book-ends held several books. Ben reached down and picked up one of the book-ends. He straightened.

"Drop that, Higgins," Rossi snapped.

There was a gun in Rossi's hand. It covered him. Ben looked at the book-end. He glanced toward the side window, toward Rossi. He shook his head. Tony would be at the hedge, now. He might even be running forward. Ben knew that if he was going to do anything there was no time to waste. He took a step forward.

"Drop that, Higgins," Rossi ordered.

"Drop it?" said Ben. "I'll drop it. Like this."

His arm swung up. His body pivoted toward the curtained window. He hurled the book-end that way with all the force he could summon. It crashed through the curtain and the window, snapping the curtain up. Ben started running for the window. He heard the sharp explosion of Rossi's gun and felt the hot, ripping scrape of a bullet across his shoulder. He hadn't thought Rossi would fire at him. Fear struck at him, now, and with it the knowledge that this was the end. And that at the end he was on Tony's side, even fighting against himself.

He was at the window. He was leaning through it, shouting. He was shouting, *"Tony! Tony! Get back! Keep away! Rossi—"*

A numbing blow fell against the side of his head. Flashing lights danced before his eyes, then blinked out. The night seemed to reach in through the window and gather around him.

"YOU'RE lucky," said Joe Blake. "One scratch on the shoulder, another on the head. You'll probably get a week off to rest up. You don't need it."

This was in a hospital room the next morning. Sunlight fell across the bed. Joe Blake stood in the sunlight, grinning.

"What happened to Tony Scarcelli?" Ben asked.

"He shot it out with Rossi and two of Rossi's men after Rossi got you. He's dead, Ben. So is Rossi. Both were alive when we got there. Both talked. Tony sent you a message. It was just, good luck. We got Carlos Hall, too, and the woman. The woman wasn't Maria Scarcelli. Maria wasn't involved in the break. She came back to the city a week ago."

Ben stared up at the ceiling. He nodded.

The door to the room opened and a nurse carried in a vase of flowers.

"I brought you those flowers," said Blake, "but it wasn't my idea. Why should I be bringing you flowers? I happened to talk to a certain dark haired girl over the telephone. She ordered them."

"Maria!" Ben gasped.

Blake nodded.

"Get me out of here," said Ben.

He threw back the covers. He swung his feet to the floor. He stared at Joe Blake. He said, "Well, what are you standing there for? Get my clothes."

"You're not going anyplace," said Joe Blake. "She's here. She's waiting in the hall. Do you want to see her?"

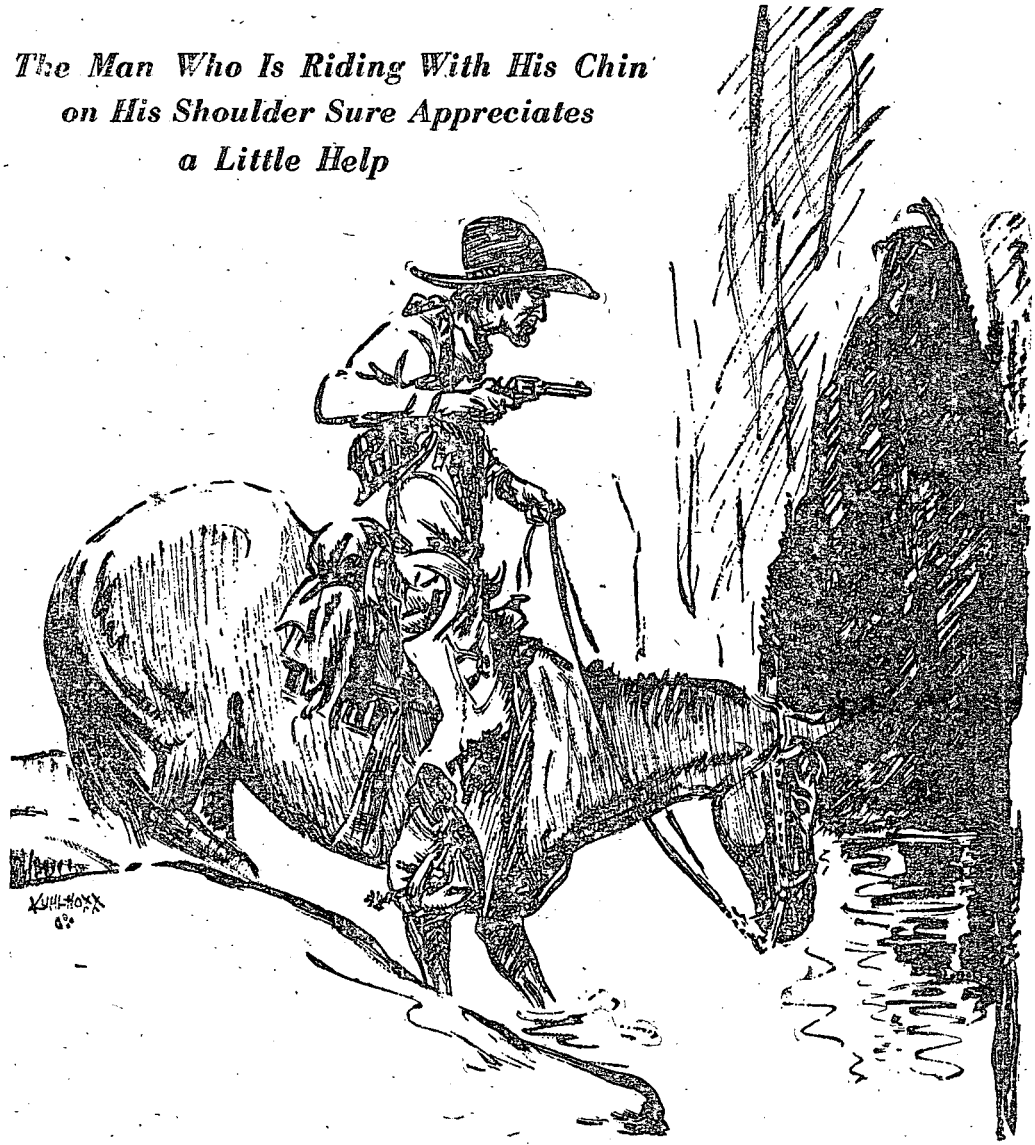
Ben lay down again. He pulled up the covers. He nodded.

"I hope," said Blake from the doorway, "that you two know what you're doing."

Ben made no answer. He watched the door. It closed. After a moment it opened and Maria came in. She stood near the door looking at him and Ben could read in the warmth of her eyes all he wanted to know. He held up his arms and Maria came toward him, running.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Man Who Is Riding With His Chin on His Shoulder Sure Appreciates a Little Help



A GUNMAN'S GRATITUDE

By CADDO CAMERON

THE more a man has got, the less he appreciates what he gets. Take me, for example. When I've got good reason to believe that there ain't no reward notices with my brands and marks a-hangin' in courthouses, postoffices, stage stations and trading posts here and yander over the West, I sorta take it for granted that I can go and come as I please and when some fella invites me to put up my horse and have chuck and spread my blankets on his floor or in his spare bunk, I don't appreciate it like I'd ought to because that's what everybody does in this country; but just let me make myself short some place so that I have to ride day and night with my chin on my shoulder a-watchin' the dust of the law fog my back trail, with maybe a leg-weary horse under me and bullet holes

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in me, then somebody takes me in and hides me and my horse and sets the law off on a cold scent and looks after me until I'm able to ride again—what I mean, I *do* appreciate that. And I don't never forget it, either.

A few years back, over in The Choctaw Nation close to the Arkansaw line, George Smith and his wife taken me in thataway. Ever since then I've been lookin' for a chance to pay back at least part of what I owe to that Indian and his Choctaw wife, and when my chance finally did come it was mighty nigh too big for me.

It happens like this.

I have a little shootin' scrape with Pawnee Ike near Muskogee over in The Creek Nation and he comes out second best. Of course, everybody knows that Ike is a genuine badman, but I ain't got no idea that he was what you might call the bodyguard for the liquor business up and down that part of The Nations until a fella comes and asks me to take Ike's place and do the killin' for the boss whisky peddlers whenever any serious killin' is needed, which is right frequent it seems. Naturally, I tell him to go to hell. A few innocent words like that can cause a man a heap of misery. In no time at all I'm gettin' shot at from ambush and knifed at in the dark, and I leave out from that country in a mile-high cloud of dust with a pack of wolves on my trail.

I travel too daggoned fast and Old Yaller, my dun packhorse, goes lame on me when we're gettin' close to the Fort Townson Road. It ain't more'n fifteen mile up this road to George Smith's place, but I won't go there for fear of carryin' war to George and Tama, his wife, so I put up at Blaney's Tavern and stage station and figure to keep my mouth shut and stay here until my horse is able to hit the trail again. Reckon the wolves got lost somewheres back in this rough country, for I've been here a week without a sign of trouble.

Not many people know me over here. It's hard for me to get lost in a crowd, though, bein' six and a half foot tall with a hawk face and long black hair, so I pass myself off as an Osage a-headin' north to his reservation after visitin' some Chicasaw friends down on the Washita. The Osages breed tall men and these folks take me at my word.

IT'S an hour or so after noon one hot day and I'm a-settin' on the tavern porch. Six, seven other men are out here, too, smokin' and talkin', but I ain't sayin' nothin' and they don't pay me no mind, figurin' I'm an Indian and not much on the talk nohow. One of 'em has just got back from the Creek Country.

I pick up my ears, when he asks, "Any of you fellas know Pawnee Ike?"

Most of the men know him or have heard of him, and one declares, "Sure I know that breed killer. He's bad."

"*Was* bad," says the first fella. "Pawnee Ike is a plumb good citizen now."

Everybody wants to know how come.

"Pawnee tangled with a road agent in a blind pig over to Muskogee," was the answer, "and when the smoke lifted they was a-carryin' Pawnee out feet foremost, huntin' a patch of soft ground."

"Who is this road agent?"

"Fella they call 'Mistah Gunman'."

I'm rollin' me a smoke and don't look up. Seems like they've all heard of me, but none of 'em know me.

A wiry little old-timer who looks like he might be a native of these mountains or from just across the line in Arkansaw, goes on to say, "What I mean, boys—I'd shore hate to be in this here Mistah Gunman's boots. Pawnee Ike had connections and they're worse than Pawnee was."

They fire questions at him, but the old boy closes up tighter'n a terrapin. "I done talked too much already. Some connections stretch from here to yander and 'taint far to either place from where I set."

Now, what's he drivin' at? What does he know about Pawnee Ike's connections? Do they stretch away out here to the Arkansaw line? Wish I could talk to the old-timer, but I dassn't. They change the subject. The killin' of a Territory badman ain't good for a long talk. There's too many of 'em gettin' killed and waitin' to be. Reckon I'm on this waitin' list. Every gunslinger is due to get his'n sooner or later.

From the tavern porch on the ridge I can see up and down the Old Fort Towson Road a pretty far piece. It's a busy trail and has been since away back in the early 1800s. Freighters, movers, stage coaches and riders goin' in both directions, but the movers are

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mostly a-headin' south towards Texas and free or cheap land. Men are ridin' both north and south. Some of 'em come open and swing down at the rack to visit for a spell. Others ride in one stirrup like they've got used to watchin' their back trail. They ride with their hats pulled low and they keep on a-ridin'. Puts me in mind of the way I ride a good part of the time.

After a while a cloud of dust tops a rise north of here, starts down the rise and splits into two clouds close together. The dust is comin' mighty fast. Nobody else seems to notice it. Reckon they ain't got no reason to be suspicious of fast-movin' dust. But I have. I watch that dust. Pretty soon I can see what's makin' it—one rider followed by two. They're pourin' in the leather and a-feedin' the iron. The fella in the lead is layin' flat on his horse's neck and he's a-losin' ground. They'll run onto him right about here.

Well, it don't noways concern me. I'm an Indian. I mind my own business and ain't no hand to talk.

The lead horse in this race is willin', but he ain't got the speed. A short distance from the tavern the two riders split and catch the third between them. The big man on the nigh side reaches out and lifts him bodily from his saddle. He comes up a-fightin' and squawllin' like a wildcat and I get a good look at him. He's a ganglin' kid—maybe thirteen, fourteen!

Tthe two riders slide to a stop in a cloud of dust and jump down. The one on the off side is middle-sized and every bit as dark as I am. Holdin' onto the kid, the big fella is cussin' and slappin' him around and the boy is fightin' back the best he can, but about all he can do is to claw and beat at the man's arm. I forget myself complete. I'm on my feet a-headin' that way before I know it. There's a clatterin' of chairs and boot heels on the porch behind me.

The two are still at it and the boy ain't hurt none when I get there. I tell the big cuss, "Need any help, Mistah? Strikes me that you've tied onto more'n you're man enough to handle."

He's got a square face and sandy hair and he looks mighty nigh as big as a buffalo to me. Hangin' onto the boy's arm, he growls at me plumb ferocious, "Give me any more of your lip, High Pockets, and I'll tie onto you!"

This jasper sure rubs me wrong. I haul off with my left hand and slap him alongside the head so daggoned hard it makes my own teeth chatter. He lets go of the boy quick. Damned if he don't make a pass at his holster!

I dassn't bust my hands on his big jaw. May need these hands for serious gunplay before I get to my hideout over in Arkansaw. So I beef him cold with the barrel of my six-shooter. He grunts like a shot hog, wilts and piles up in his tracks. Didn't waste any time in makin' my draw, for he's got a pardner, and my left-hand gun is out a split second before I hit him with my right. But his pardner just stands there with arms folded innocent and peaceable. Can't blame him much. At least three men behind me have got him covered!

The boy is a-gawkin' up at me. "Golly!" he cries out. *"You're Mister Gunman!"*

That does it. The men behind me cuss surprised-like and gather closer, plumb curious. Nothin' else to do, so I grin down at the kid, and say, "You're dead right, Bud. That's what most folks call me." Then I glance around at the others, and go on, "Hope you don't hold it against me for makin' out to be an Osage, fellas. I've got pretty good reasons for huntin' cover."

The old-timer speaks up, "Hell, no! Many's the time I've been ashamed to admit I'm a white man."

The kid asks, "Don't you know me, Mister Gunman?"

I look close at him. "I've shore seen you somewheres, but can't recollect when. Maybe it was a long time back and you've growed some."

"That's it. I'm Billy Smith—George Smith's boy."

'Shore!" I put out my hand and he shakes right big. "How's your dad and mom?"

"Mom, she's fine. But, Dad, he—" Billy sorta chokes up. I look at the big fella's pardner. He drops his eyes.

"Shore!" I put out my hand and he shakes us all about it while we're waitin' for this here sleepin' buff'ler to wake up and do a little talkin'."

Billy Smith gets started and goes so fast his words run together. "An hour

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

before sundown two days ago Dad left home on Old Nell to go to our big meadow to look at the cattle and he ain't come home. Soon's it was light next mornin' Mom and me went lookin' for him and we found where he had met up with four other riders and they had argued a while and then he rode off with them and I tracked 'em away up Coon Cayon and lost them when they took the creek and I know Old Nell's hoofprints and I'll swear that she was bein' led, and I betcha they held up Dad and taken him with 'em. Mom sent me here today to see can we get some help to look for Dad."

This Choctaw boy talks English like a white kid, but I'll gamble that he can track like an Indian. "Strikes me that you've done mighty fine job, Billy," I tell him and some of the others say the same thing. "How come you to tangle with these jaspers and who are they?"

He points to the one on his feet. "That's Tom Watkins and this big man is Sandy Storms. I met 'em on the road about ten mile this side of home and Sandy wanted to know where I was goin' and I told him and he said I'd better go home and behave myself and I said I was goin' to get help to look for my dad and he took a holt of my reins and I grabbed my six-shooter and he taken it away from me and I bit his hand and my Tanglefoot pony got the jump on 'em and they chased me all the way here."

He reaches down quick to the big cuss and pulls an old cap-and-ball pistol out from underneath his shirt. "See!" Here's my six-shooter."

I nod, and say, "Yep, and it sounds like you're a-talkin' might straight, Billy."

Turnin' to Tom Watkins, I ask him short, "Got anything to say, Mistah?"

He shakes his head. "The kid bit Sandy's hand, then Sandy taken out after him. That's all there was to it."

"Like hell it is!" I snap. "These Smiths are my friends and I owe them a plenty. Why did you try to keep the boy from comin' for help?"

This Watkins is a cool customer. "That was Sandy's idea. Ask him."

"Uh-huh, I'll do that when he wakes up. Looks like he's a-fixin' to now."

Sandy Storms groans and rolls over and gets to all-fours with his big head lollin' from side to side like a bull buff'ler with a lung shot. Then he sets down and rubs the place on his jaw where my gun barrel busted him. While he's gettin' his senses back I pick up his hat and put it on his head just for cussedness. This skypiece looks like he'd been diggin' a well—red mud and water marks dried on the top of its brim and peak of its crown. I glance at Tom Watkins' hat. It's marked the same way. Strikes me this is sorta curious, but I scarcely give it a second thought now.

Th big fella is plenty tough. He's on his feet in no time. Trouble is what he mostly wants now, but he tries to do a little thinkin' before he starts it. "I'm shore I'd ought to know you, High Pockets, but my head ain't workin' right. Who in hell are you, anyhow?"

"Lots of folks call me "Slim.' "

His partner speaks up, "Slim Gunman."

Sandy's eyes open a little, then narrow, and he growls, "Well, Mistah Gunman, you're away off'n your home range. Better get to hell out of this country quick. That's all I've got to say to you."

I shake my head. "No it ain't, Storms. You've still got to tell me why you tried to keep the kid from comin' for help to find his dad. Talk!"

"Damned if I will!"

I happen to know that almost any gunfighter would rather get shot than to be buffaloed with a six-shooter. "If that's how you feel about it, I'll have to beat you up with a gun barrel until you change your mind," I tell him quiet. "Grab iron, Storms!"

My Colt is lifted to strike before he makes a move, then he backs off a quick step and folds his arms. This big fella ain't no fool. His head is a-workin' now and what I see in his face tells me that he's got somethin' up his sleeve and no tellin' what it is. He's plenty slippery and a bigger man than I thought he was. Wouldn't surprise me if he's *somebody* in his own business, whatever that is.

"No call for you to get red-eyed, Gunman," says Sandy. "I don't mind tellin' you that George Smith has done me dirt and I'll do anything I can to get square. That's why I tried to stop his kid."

That *could* be the truth. I nod and grunt,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and motion to the boy. "Come along, Billy. Leave your pony at the rack and I'll buy you a sody pop."

Watkins and Storms ride off. The other men come into the tavern with me and the kid, everybody talkin' at once. Here in The Nations you can't buy anything but soft drink legal, but the old-timer takes care of that.

"Boys," he declares, "I ain't never been able to understand how any country can stay as green as this'n and still be so damned dry. A fella has to carry his own pre-cyppy-tation with him. I aim to buy Mistah Gunman a drink. Got somethin' in my valise that ain't fit for nothin' but drinkin'. Don't you-all run off while I go and get it."

"Run off—hell!" drawls a thirsty-lookin' fella from Texas. "You couldn't run me off with dogs."

EVERYBODY is riled a plenty, for they all like George Smith. The men here want to organize a posse right away and they make me feel mighty good by askin' me to lead them, but this ain't no job for a posse. A thousand men couldn't comb this rough country to do any good. This is a one-man job—my job.

I ride home with Billy to the double log house where I once put in thirty days a-fightin' for my life and would've lost if it hadn't been for George and Tama Smith. George is one full-blood who likes to work with his hands. He's farmin' a nice parcel of tribal land in a creek bottom and he runs cattle on the free range hereabouts. The Fort Towson Road cuts through his place and he has dug out a fine spring in a draw about three miles from the house and fixed a good campground for freighters and movers who want to throw off there. This camp is known from Fort Smith to Red River and George was smart to build it. Freighters who stop here buy most of the farm stuff he has to sell and it ain't nothin' unusual to see one of their big wagons loaded to the top of its sideboards with the fine apples he raises, or piled high with the hay he cuts and bales in his meadows.

Before light next mornin' Billy rides up Coon Canyon with me to where his dad and the others taken to the creek, then I try to send the kid back, but he won't go until I convince him that somebody has got to stand guard over his mother because there's plenty trouble in the wind. I feel certain the boy will get home all right. Nevertheless, I set my blue horse there in the timber, roll a smoke and listen until the sound of Billy is lost in the early mornin' voice of these wild Kiamichi Mountains—night prowlers goin' to bed, dry roamers a-gettin' up. Likewise, I do some powerful hard thinkin'.

It ain't reasonable to believe that George's trouble is in any way hooked up with my quarrel with the whiskey peddlers, but, when Sandy Storms found out who I was the look on his face told me that he certainly knew somethin' about it. Besides, I'll gamble that he's mixed up in the disappearance of George Smith. Him sayin' that he's got a feud with George holds water all right, though, because the men at the tavern said he and Bob Watkins had worked for Smith off and on until George finally fired 'em for keeps. Nobody seems to know what these two rannies do for a livin', but everybody allows they live good. The more I think about it the more I'm convinced that they tried to stop the boy from goin' for help so as to gain time to finish somethin' that they or somebody else had started. Maybe I'm just imagin' things, though. Reckon the best way to make certain is to use myself as bait and ride their trail alone into the mountains like I'm about to do and see whether I can't catch onto somethin'. It's a fool play, I'll admit, but George and Tama made a fool play when they taken me in that time.

Soon as it's light enough to read sign I walk my horse up Coon Canyon on the left bank of the creek hopin' to find where George and the four riders left the water. Lucky for me it hasn't rained in the last three days. Coon Creek is like many another stream in the Kiamichis—clear and swift with mostly rock and gravel bottom, and a man can lose his trail in there if his horse will swim against the current in deep pools that are scattered along. The walls of the canyon are steep, but broken by draws through which deer and cattle come down to water. I work my way slow up stream, studyin' every inch of both banks where horses could get out of the water without findin' a damned thing until the sun is up

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and goin' good. I'm plumb disgusted and feelin' low by the time I finally run onto somethin'.

I've halted on a ledge at the lower end of a long pool that looks like swimmin' water. The creek makes a sharp S-bend here and has cut back under my rock no tellin' how far. Glancin' down into the clear water I catch sight of somethin' that has lodged under there. . . . A dead horse! I hit the ground quick and kneel down to look. There's at least ten foot of water here, the current is strong and the horse has been carried back to where all I can see is its light bay hindquarters and black tail. I've got to get a good look at this horse. Ahead a few yards is a thicket big enough to cover Old Blue, so I lead him in there and strip to my hide. Maybe this is foolish, but Coon Creek is mighty mean where it bores under that rock and I don't want to be weighted down by clothes. I'd rather get shot than to drown.

On the ledge, takin' a long breath before I dive, I'm in plain sight from the walls of the canyon and sure feel naked. The water is cold, but I'm more comfortable when it closes over me. The current whips me back under the rock in no time, but it's almost like day down here until you get into the deep shadows and I'm able to look the horse over fast. It was shot in the forehead, ain't been here more'n a couple days and is still packin' its riggin'. The brand high on its neck is an iron that I don't know. Can't learn a thing from the saddle for it's like a hundred others I've seen, and I'm gettin' powerful short of breath when I happen to take a second look at the front and flank cinches. I'd *ought* to know those cinches. That time when I was laid up at his house, *I made them for George Smith!*

WITH hardly a particle of breath left in me, I fight my way back against the current to where I can come out from underneath the rock and bob up for air. Stayed under so long my head is a-roarin' like a stampede. Hanging onto the rock with my back to the east wall of the canyon, I gulp air and get ready to go down again and hunt the dark places to learn whether George himself is under the ledge. Don't think he is. I figure that when they came to this deep pool his horse wouldn't swim it, even against the weakest part of the current along the east bank, so they shot the mare and taken George with 'em. But I'd like to make certain. The stampede inside my skull has gone to millin' now and I can hear some. When I'm about ready to go—a bullet splatters on the rock a foot above my head, a rifle cracks somewhere behind me!

I duck and jerk around. Smoke at the lip of the canyon wall up there. I dive quick. Like a fool I forget to take a deep breath, so it's the end of me if the current carries me under the rock. There's a narrow break in the ledge a few yards down. I recollect havin' to ride around it and now swim towards it, fightin' the cussed current to stay out of the shadows on my right. Comin' up at this break, I'm hidden from the man with the rifle until he moves down the creek. Naturally, he'll figure I swam with the current, but maybe I can climb the eight-foot rock and get to the brush before he spots me again. A little log and some trash have drifted into the break. I reach for the log and go to draw myself up. A rusty, black-and-green snake slaps at me, misses my face by inches, so close I've looked right down his throat. An infernal cotton-mouth moccasin!

Better to be shot than bitten by that thing away out here. I throw myself backward without thinkin' and land with a splash so far out I'm clear of the rock. I fill my lungs with air and go under. A bullet spangs the water where I went down and the shock makes his lead ricochet. Don't try to tell *me* that a man can't sweat under water. I'm a-sweatin' to beat hell now. My breath is runnin' low and I ain't got much time to think things over. As I recollect it, this west bank can be seen from the east side for quite a ways down. The only place where I can get out is through that break in the ledge and I'll have to do it before the rifleman moves to where he can get a shot at me. He's got some rough goin' on top of the canyon wall and maybe I can make it. Damn that snake! It's him or me now. If I know moccasins—he won't run, and I can't.

I come up at the break in the rock. The butt of the log ain't more'n a foot from my face, for I've gone in as close as I can on account of the rifle. Can't see the snake,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but he's somewhere up there under the far side a-layin' for me. Movin' mighty careful but fast, I get a toe-hold in the rock and brace myself against a shoulder that jutts out so as to give me one hand free, then pull down a little stick out of the driftwood. I scrape it along the top of the log. Up comes that snake's head. He's closer now. I'll swear I smell the thing. It stinks like a turtle pond in a swamp. It strikes, throwin' a third of its length across the log. Maybe I've drawn a six-shooter faster than I hit that snake with my stick, but I doubt it. Before it can draw back to strike again its spine is broken where it's draped across the log. But the infernal thing goes to strikin' crazy every which way with the twelve inches of its body that ain't paralyzed, *and it's a-slidin' down the log onto me!*

Again I throw myself back into the water, but not so far out this time. The snake drops into the creek a yard from my face, but I dassn't move back. Crippled, it can't swim to do any good, but it's still a-strikin' crazy. I tread water and beat it with my stick like we're both crazy. The moccasin floats away.

Half a minute later I climb to the top of the ledge and dive for the bushes. A second before I reach cover a bullet burns a welt across my back and a rifle barks from the wall of the canyon. I take a chance on givin' him time for another shot—stop, stiffen, throw up an arm, then fall headforemost into the brush. Layin' flat there, I shake the bushes. Two more bullets cut leaves and twigs inches above me. Somebody aims to get me good. Wormin' my way to Old Blue over in the little thicket, I climb into my clothes quick and jerk my rifle from its saddle-scabbard. With that cuss on the canyon wall I can't go no farther in my hunt for George Smith.

Movin' inches at a time, I work my way to the fringe of the brush. Across the creek the bluff rises to a hundred feet and seventy-five of that is almost straight up, scrubby bushes and weeds on top. Pretty soon my man shows himself. Evidently he thinks he got me, for he comes to the brink of the cliff with his rifle and looks hard at the brush where I fell. It ain't far over there. I draw a bead on his right knees and let him have it. With the crack of my rifle that leg is jerked from under him and I think for a second that he'll roll over the cliff, but he catches himself in the nick of time. His rifle clatters on the rocks below. Now, I can go and hunt George Smith.

THE deep pool follows this sharp S-bend. Just around the shoulder of the cliff on the far side an underground stream has bored a tunnel down to Coon Creek and the pool is shallow over there. I stop and look hard at the mouth of that tunnel. Its roof is high enough to accommodate a man on a horse and judgin' by the ripple on the main stream, there ain't much water comin' down from above. On my way up canyon again, I keep thinkin' about that tunnel.

For a solid mile after leavin' the pool I search every foot of both banks in the hopes of findin' where the four riders left the creek. Nary a trace of them. Of course, they might've got away on one of the cowpaths where stock comes down to water, but I've been trailin' ever since I was a shirt-tailed kid and my Osage friends swear they learned me all they know about it, so I'll gamble that those riders are still in the creek if they came this far. Meantime, no tellin' what has happened or is happenin' to George Smith. I've got to get somewhere and do somethin'.

I halt and look back, thinkin' damned hard. . . . All of a sudden I remember the dried mud and red water spots Sandy Storms and Tom Watkins had on their hats. In my day I've hid out in a few caves. Down in this rainy country their walls and roofs are muddy and they all drip water!

I can't hardly wait to get back to the pool. We cross the creek in shallow water a short distance above it, wade down stream to the tunnel mouth and Old Blue don't so much as wet my saddle skirts at any point on the way. My horse stops there, looks up the throat of that block hole, snorts soft, then rolls an eye at me.

"Maybe we're damned fools, fella," I tell him soft, "but if you're game to take a chance on it, I am. Go ahead to where it's good and dark, then we'll wait a few minutes for our eyes to get used to it."

Now, Old Blue is amighty fine night horse or I wouldn't be ridin' him. He goes on, a-walkin' cautious in shallow water with

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

solid rock bottom, and when we round a turn to where it's pitch black I rein in. We stand here maybe ten minutes. I'm commencin' to make out a few things and know that his eyes are pickin' up a heap more'n mine, so we go on. This hole is fairly straight and nowhere do we have to squeeze through, though I have to duck off and on and once in a while my shoulder or stirrup brushes a wall. Why don't I get down and lead my horse? If there's any sudden drop-offs in here he'll see them a damned sight quicker'n I could. There's a pretty good updraft. The wind whispers along the slimy walls and drippin' roof loud enough to be heard above the splashin' of Blue's feet. Wish that wind could talk. Maybe it would tell me where it's a-headin' and what I'll run into when we get there, if we ever do.

It's gettin' darker right along, if there *is* such a thing as thicker dark. It stands to reason that I'm a heap safer in this hole than I was a-ridin' the creek bank in broad daylight with a rifle throwin' lead at me, but I don't *feel* safer. It's cool, but sweat is a-crawlin' down my ribs and legs. Maybe it's the dark—a darkness so heavy it presses against you from all sides and makes it sorta hard for a fella to take a good breath.

There really ain't nothin' to be afraid of in this hole. If anybody was comin' from either direction I'd hear 'em. The truth is, *I'd give anything to hear somebody!*

I can see a little, too, or imagine I can. Ain't bumped my head only a few times. Maybe a little light gets trapped in the water and is carried down here—that is, if this water comes from where there *is* any light. *Maybe it don't!* Maybe we'll keep on a-walkin' deeper and deeper into the earth until the very weight of this darkness wears us out, and we fall down and die in here. Old Blue is feelin' the strain of it, too. He ain't done nothin' to get heated up, but when I put my hand on his neck it's wet with sweat. He's a smart horse. He's got imagination. He's afraid, too, but he just keeps on a-ploddin' into deeper darkness—into nowhere. I'd ought to have as much nerve as a horse, but I ain't. I'm scared. I'd turn back if I wasn't ashamed to act the coward before my horse.

After a while Old Blue begins to slow down, walks slower and slower until he stops. I can't see or hear a damned thing, but I won't tell him to go on. Hell, no! Then it dawns on me that the darkness has thinned out a little. Just ahead is a lump of black a-hangin' from the roof. That's a rock I'll have to duck. We're gettin' some light, all right. Blue has stopped to listen and let his eyes change.

Pretty soon my horse steps out again, faster now. It gets lighter and I see his ears and they're cocked straight ahead and his nostrils are flared, then he speeds up and would've struck a jiggle through the shallow water if I hadn't held him down. He's mighty glad to get out of this hole and so am I. Roundin' a turn in the tunnel we meet full daylight comin' to us through a screen of bushes and I walk Blue right up to them, then get down to take a look outside.

This tunnel ends at a little pond in a small sag chock full of willows and switch canes. A spring is boilin' out of the bank near by and I realize that we've waded its branch all the way up from Coon Creek no tellin' how far. I squirm to the top of the sag where I can see over the bushes. The country around here is mostly level and covered by heavy timber. Thick brush hides this spring and the mouth of the tunnel complete. There's an animal path comin' down to the pool. By studyin' the willows and canes I see where horses have gone into the tunnel and come out of it. This is the best hideout and that damned hole is the best get-away I've ever seen, bar none includin' my place over in the breaks of the North Canadian.

Figurin' that I've struck a hot scent, I move fast now and scout the path through the timber afoot. Deer and cattle have fouled the sign bad, but I do find several sets of shod hoofprints that were made by ridden horses and they ain't over two three days old. These horses were headin' away from the spring, so I get Old Blue and we take their trail. Two miles farther along we come to where the pines are tall and there ain't much undergrowth. Yonder is a big log house! I take my little spyglass and look the place over good. One thing I notice particular—the house is more like a fort to fight from than a place to live in. Beyond it is a stable and some out-buildin's. Behind the stable is a more or less open pasture and I

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

count twelve mules in there, some hobbled. Three horses under saddle are staked on grass near the house. Nary a man in sight.

Comin' from this direction I'll be spotted long before I can get to the house in daylight, and I won't wait until night. Maybe they've got George Smith in there. So I back off into the timber and ride a half-circle around the place and go in under cover of what looks like a powerful big smokehouse. Leavin' Blue in a clump of bushes, I take it afoot from tree to tree. Pretty soon I reach the smokehouse, thankin' my lucky stars that nobody saw me or let on if they did. A look through the logs where chinkin' is gone treats me to a big surprise. This ain't a smokehouse. It's a still-house!

The still is the biggest one I've ever seen and it's built different, too. But about all I know about stills is that I ain't got no use for the men who make bad whiskey to sell to Indians. Most redmen just naturally can't handle the stuff and it ruins them complete. Movin' to the corner of the still-house, I stop here to listen. It ain't over thirty feet to the main house and the wooden shutters on its windows are open, no glass. Sounds to me like men are eatin' in there—the tinkle of a dish, a laugh, and a man says, "Sandy, gimme a helpin' of that hog bosom."

NOW, I ain't no glutton for trouble and do a little fast thinkin'. There's anyhow three men in there, maybe more, but I've got a good chance to catch them by surprise because they'll figure their guard on the creek will warn 'em in time if anybody is comin'. Near as I can tell, this place is too far away for them to have heard the shootin'. Likewise, if I was in their boots I'd gamble that no stranger would ever follow them into the tunnel even if he did find it. So I try my guns in their leather, then make a quick run to the back of the house and slide along to the nearest window. One of its shutters ain't all the way open. Lookin' through the crack between the shutter and frame I can see half the big kitchen.

Three men are at a table eatin'. Facin' me on the other side are Tom Watkins and a long-geared redhead that I recollect seein' in Muskogee, and there ain't no mistakin' Sandy Storms' broad back on this side. I duck and move under the window. Now I can see the other end of the kitchen and there sets George Smith! He's tied hand and foot in a chair. At first I can't hardly recognize the wiry little Indian, he's beat up so bad. His thin face is swelled to half again its size, his head is slumped forward until his chin is on his chest, his scalp has been cut in places and his coarse black hair is matted with blood. I'm wonderin' whether maybe George ain't dead.

Then Sandy Storms growls out, "We got mighty good grub, George. You'll die pretty soon if you don't get somethin' to eat and drink. Better talk and save yourself a lot of trouble."

George Smith lifts his head like it's powerful heavy. His eyes are swelled almost shut, but they glitter through their puffed lids. He can't hardly talk, either, but there's poison in what he says, "Go to hell, you big son-of-a-dog!"

Sandy Storms chuckles. 'This here spring water is so damned cold it makes my teeth ache. Must come from an ice-house somewheres under ground."

George's head slumps forward again. It may be all of three days since he had a drop to drink or a bit to eat. For maybe thirty seconds I stand there and look at the man who taken me in when I was bleedin' to death and saved my life, then risked his own freedom by lyin' to the law so as to keep them from catchin' and hangin' me. I don't know what this is all about—don't know what Storms is tryin' to make him tell—*don't give a damn!*

The table is right in front of the open rack door, so close I can stand on the threshold and reach it with my long leg. I move cautious to the door. One quick step carries me inside. The three men have their hands on top of the table. I give it a kick that topples it onto Watkins and the redhead, dishes, coffeepot and everything. Sandy Storms jumps up, grabbin' at his holster. I knock him down with the barrel of my six-shooter. This all happens in seconds. They're caught absolutely flat-footed, but Watkins and the redhead go for their guns as they're fallin' backwards. What I mean—they're plenty fast. If the table hadn't blocked his draw, Tom Watkins would've got me. We fire almost together. His bullet

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

whips my hat away. The redhead's arm is caught by the leg of Tom's chair.

"Drop it!" I bark. "Quick!"

I sure feel mean as hell and maybe I look it. There ain't nothin' else for the redhead to do nohow, so he drops his gun and gets his hands in sight with the table on top of him. Storms is hunkered down to the floor, groggy for a minute. Watkins is knocked out by a bullet high in his chest. I hurry and get their pistols and toss 'em into the yard, then go and cut George loose.

"Did Storms beat you up like this?"

"Yes, Slim," he mumbles. "Storms."

There's a sound on the hard clay floor behind me. I whirl. It's Sandy Storms comin' on tip-toe. I forgot his knife. He's a-chargin' me with a ten-inch bowie knife in his hand, murder in his big face. Either he figures I won't shoot him because he ain't got a gun, or he's so crazy mad he don't give a damn. Anyhow, a pistol-whippin' ain't pretty to watch or pleasant to talk about. When it's all over I've got several bad slashes, but none serious. Sandy Storms is beat up until he's down a-howlin' for help and I leave him in worse shape than George ever was.

WHILE we're ridin' away from there, Smith tells me a lot of things that I don't know and never even suspicioned. In the whiskey business Sandy Storms is a top dog and the four men who chased me from Muskogee are workin' for him. The redhead is one of 'em, the rifleman on the creek another'n and two more are off in the mountains somewhere a-huntin' me now. He was bound and determined to get me.

By some kind of a secret process this big still and the man who owns and runs it turn out the best whiskey made in The Territory. The still is so well hid the law ain't never found it. Everything is packed in and out on mules and there's two ways to go—by tunnel, or over the trail we're a-ridin' now. The liquor is moved out of the country and distributed to peddlers by freighters who carry it in barrels under loads of supplies, and in jugs inside bales of hay.

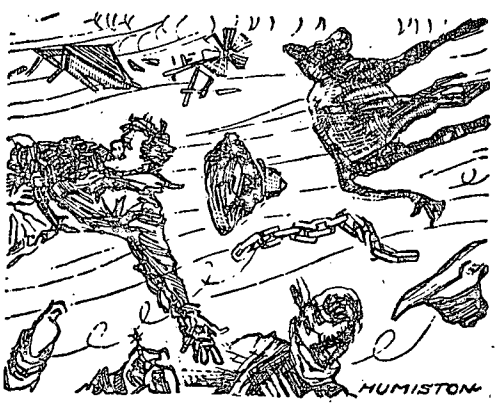
For a long time Storms has been tryin' to find the still and that's how come he and Watkins used to work for George. When Smith found out that they were hooked up with the liquor business he fired 'em, but Sandy had already stumbled onto the tunnel and still. Somehow or other Storms got the idea that George was hired by the owner of the outfit and knew how to make this good whiskey, so the big devil tried to beat and starve Smith into givin' away the secret.

When I shake hands with Billy and Tama Smith this evenin' and tell her I can't stay for supper, I'm a disappointed man and plumb bitter towards the world in general. For you see, *the owner of that damned still is George Smith!*

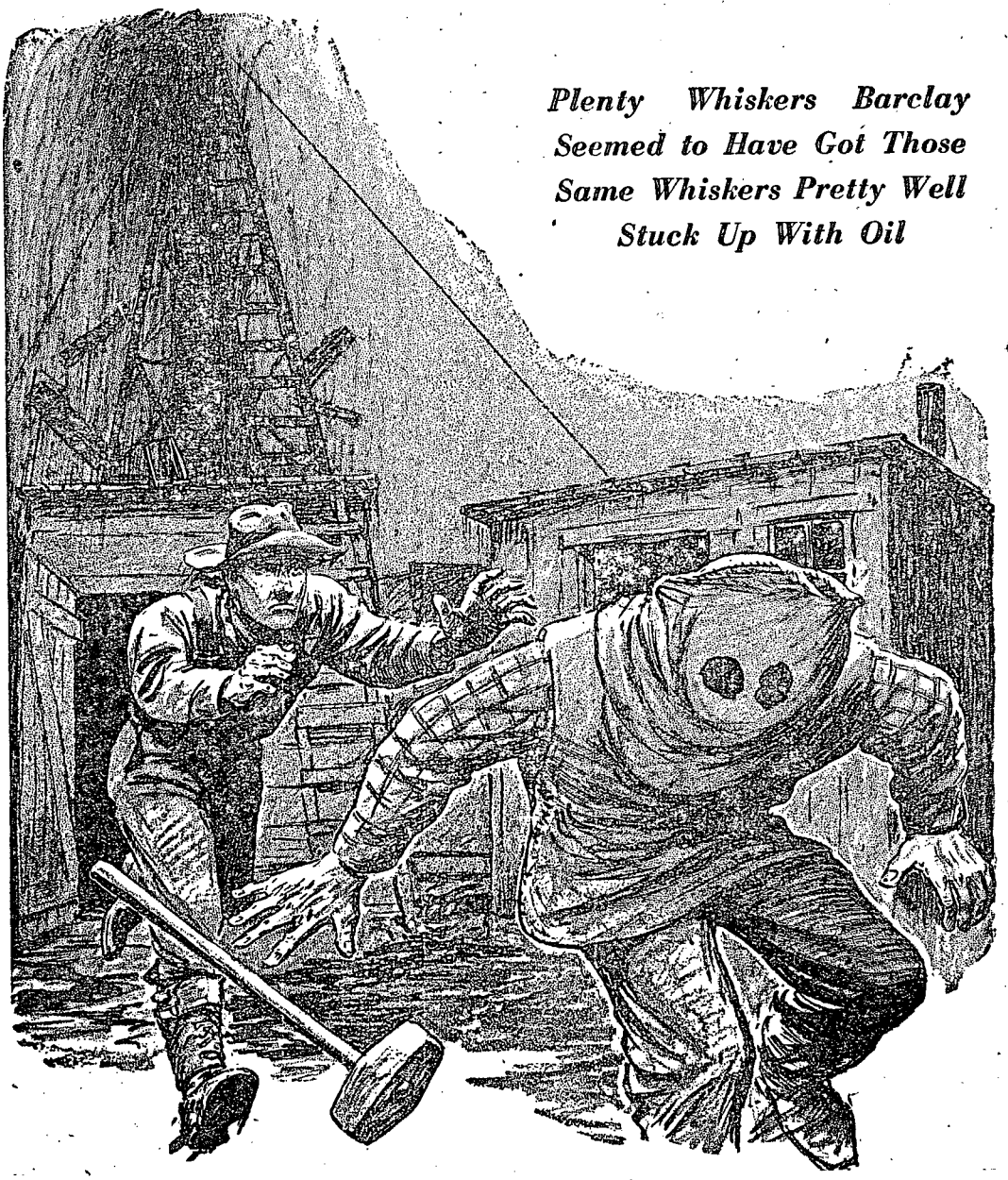
Texas Zephyr

By S. Omar Barker

TO FIGGER how hard the wind blows
Out on the Texas Plains,
You hang a fresh-killed beef up
With a pair of loggin' chains;
An' if on the mornin' after,
You find that your beef is skinned
An' you have to ride to find the hide—
There's been just a *leetle* wind!



PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Plenty Whiskers Barclay Seemed to Have Got Those Same Whiskers Pretty Well Stuck Up With Oil

THE BIGGER THEY COME

By RAY PALMER TRACY

WHEN he reached the climax of a ten-year search, Wireline Fuller was striding over a ridge about half way between his parked car and where Ruby Creek had cut a gap through the towering foothills of the Rockies. Tucked cozily among thick sagebrush were four rocks protruding through the heavy blanket of tertiary wash that covered the section.

The rocks stood in line like a decimated squad of soldiers. Not only their alignment,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but the fact that their parent formation should be lying far below, and no business showing here, were the things that caught Wireline's attention.

The big oil well driller's eyes swept over the easily read contours of the surrounding terrain and came back to the four rocks.

"Holy mackerel! A fault!" he exclaimed. "And lookit the spot it picked!"

With the four rocks to guide him, Wireline quickly uncovered evidence to confirm his hope that the fault had thrown a solid barrier across this minor fold which paralleled the main anticline. Located at this strategic spot, the fault was as good an oil structure closure as a reverse dip. And it was so well hidden, unless a geologist stumbled on the evidence as Wireline had done, he could walk over it a hundred times without suspecting its presence.

Wireline was employed as morning-tower driller on the Magnum Oil Company's Rocky Butte well No. 2, a few miles out of the town of Deckerton, and twenty miles south of the fault. There was a three day shut down of the operation on account of a delayed shipment of casing. The driller was using his layoff time for one of his fishing trips.

Since his first job in the oil fields, most of the time of these fishing trips had been consumed by searches for an unleased, shallow oil structure. This was it. The second Wall Creek sand, the producer, could not be over four hundred feet deep.

AS FOR it being unleased, Wireline had to laugh about that. It was really funny. Plenty Whiskers Barclay, Magnum manager for the Deckerton area, acting on the assurance of a Magnum geologist that there was no chance for oil on the Bar-2, the ranch where the fault was located, had allowed a Magnum oil lease on the ground to lapse ten days before.

On second thought, Wireline didn't feel so much like laughing. The Magnum Oil Company considered the whole Deckerton area as its private pasture. The very fact that Magnum had placed its chief trouble shooter, Plenty Whiskers Barclay, in charge of the section's operations, was a warning to even the big boys to step softly. And Plenty Whiskers wasn't going to like the idea of a Magnum driller taking advantage of a Magnum geologist's error.

"If I get the lease, I better step high, wide and diplomatic, or the fur is going to fly," Wireline made a ridiculous understatement as he hurried back to his car.

He found a gate branded with a *Bar-2*, and with *Rick Spencer, Prop*, burned under the symbol, and drove down a dusty lane. Ahead of him sprawled a set of weathered buildings that failed to even hint at their owner's sound financial standing. Rick Spencer was not one to put money into paint when government bonds were such a splendid investment.

The driller found Rick down at the corral repairing a gate with used nails, most of which he had to straighten before driving. He introduced himself and frankly stated he was an oil well *jarhead*. Then he mentioned the oil lease the company he was working for had recently held on the Bar-2, and ended with the purpose of his visit.

The short, square built rancher raised a pair of small, pale eyes and played a searching gaze over Wireline's rugged features. Concluding the inspection with a sharp look at the big driller's clear, grey eyes, he gave a satisfied nod.

"I take it you don't agree with the Magnum geologist that there ain't any oil on my ranch," he said.

"I ain't a geologist," evaded Wireline. "I'm only a driller who has drilled every formation around here a good many times, and I reckon I can see as fur into the ground as any *pepple pup*. There's oil north of here and south of here. Why not on the Bar-2?" He used the argument dear to the hearts of those who know nothing about geology.

"Just what I've been claiming," said Rick delighted to find such a sensible oil man. If I ever give an oil lease on the Bar-2 again, I'd ruther lease to a practical man like you than to some of them fancy pants. You know, them fellers in hornsocket britches with maps in their hind pockets and a lotta jabber about the Cretaceous and other junk nobody can understand. Me and you might talk this over and see how fur apart we be."

Four hours later Wireline came to an agreement with Rick. They drove into Brownsville to have Rick's attorney draw up the contract.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The terms were simple and regular. The land owner was to receive the usual royalty of twelve-and-one-half percent, and a cash bonus of two-hundred-fifty dollars. On his part, Wireline contracted to place an adequate drilling rig on the ground within ninety days from date, and keep it in continuous operation until the second Wall Creek sand was reached. Determined to force an immediate test, Rick refused to write in a time extension rental clause.

Soon as the names were on the dotted lines, Wireline took his copy over to the courthouse for recording and then started canvasing the country for a drilling machine to test his prize.

The depression of the early thirties was in full swing, and there were several small contractors in the section with idle outfits. It was merely a matter of where Wireline could get the best terms.

Deposited in the Deckerton bank were Wireline's savings. They were insufficient to finance the test, but he figured they would put him so near completion he could poor-boy the hole the rest of the way.

His three-day vacation ended, Wireline went back to the Rocky Butte well and helped run the casing. The drilling tools were in motion again when the Brownsville weekly paper came out with the announcement of the new oil lease on the Bar-2.

Plenty Whiskers Barclay didn't share Rick Spencer's naive belief that Wireline had leased the Bar-2 because there was oil both to the north and to the south. He instantly suspected what Wireline had found and rushed out to the Bar-2 with a geologist. Two hours after they located where the driller had parked his car they were in possession of all the facts.

The next day Wireline was at the handlebars in the Rocky Butte derrick house, when Bill Grove, the toolpusher, came in.

"Payday, Wireline," he stated briefly. Drawing an envelope from his pocket, he selected a check and passed it over.

Wireline glanced at the amount.

Here we go, he thought-and handed the check back.

"What's the matter with it?" asked Bill.

"I get paid by the day," explained Wireline as though he thought Bill actually didn't know what was going on. "This check includes the three days I was fishing while we were waiting for the casing. During that time I took an oil lease on the Bar-2. If I accepted pay for them three days, Magnum would have a claim on the lease."

"Well, what do you know!" Bill made a creditable show of surprise. "Ain't that Plenty Whiskers the slick one?"

The following morning Plenty Whiskers came to the derrick house. His heavy, flowing beard had been grown to cover a badly pock-marked face. It also masked a granite, jutting jaw. It softened his natural, piratical appearance into something akin to that of a benign patriach, until one noticed the agate quality of his eyes. He was as wide as Wireline, although not so tall. His beard pointed straight at Wireline's heart as he looked up at the driller.

"I came out to congratulate you, Wireline, on making an important discovery where our so-called geologists fell down," he began on a note of flattery.

WIRELINE gave him a quick look. The agate eyes had not warmed. They were still at their natural zero.

"Thanks," he said and returned his attention to the pumping drilling cable.

"We reward our employees for merit," Plenty Whiskers went on. "We're going to give you a thousand dollar bonus and promote you to the grade of toolpusher."

"I thought Jack Logan was next in line for promotion," said Wireline.

"That has nothing to do with it," replied Plenty Whiskers. "This is our acknowledgment of our debt to you for finding that closing fault on the Bar-2 for Magnum."

"Whoever told you about that got mixed up," said Wireline. "I didn't find that fault for Magnum; I found it entirely for myself."

"We appreciate that, but know what you'll do when you take an honest, common sense view of it," said Plenty Whiskers. "You're a loyal Magnum man and you know this is Magnum territory. We expect you to turn your oil lease on the Bar-2 over to us. Our generous offer is made with that expectation."

"Now I'll make a generous offer," countered Wireline. "In addition to your terms, I'll turn my Bar-2 oil lease over to Magnum

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for one million dollars cash and a five percent overriding royalty on all production."

"You're crazy!" snapped Plenty Whiskers.

"My offer is as sane as yours, and you know it," grinned Wireline. "Sure I know this is Magnum territory. Just the same, if the Ohio Oil Company's geologist who was over the ground last week had found the fault, would you have made any such offer? I'm more than willing to deal with Magnum. Magnum can have the lion's share, but I aim to hang onto enough to set me up in business as a producer."

Plenty Whiskers showed no sign of stepping in this open door to begin bargaining. He said, "I've bad news for anyone with money deposited in the Deckerton bank."

Banks were closing everywhere, but Wireline had had faith in the soundness of the Deckerton institution. The pit of his stomach contracted.

"Whats the matter with the Deckerton bank?" he asked.

"It failed to open its doors this morning." Plenty Whiskers eyed the driller with grim satisfaction.

Wireline had a couple hundred dollars in his pocket he had drawn to use for cash on the spot dealing for things he needed for his coming oil test. That, with what Magnum owed him was every available cent he had. Plenty Whiskers had reason to think he had him over a barrel. Wireline would have perished before he would have given the Magnum manager satisfaction by admitting it.

"That's a shame," he sympathized carelessly. "Did you have much on deposit there?"

Plenty Whiskers shrugged and took a paper from his pocket.

"Maybe you're ready now to accept your last pay check," he suggested. "I've had it made out on our Tulsa bank."

Wireline took the check. It was made out for the same amount as the one he had refused. This gesture coupled with Plenty Whiskers' manner convinced Wireline that his chances of getting a decent deal out of Magnum were non-existent. His fear of the consequences was blotted out by his anger at the injustice of it. If Plenty Whiskers was honing for a no quarter fight, he could have it. He jabbed the check at him.

"Take that back to the office and have it made out right!" he said bluntly.

"It's all right as it is," contended Plenty Whiskers with smug patience. "I'll leave it with the bookkeeper. You can pick it up anytime."

"I'll give you till tomorrow to hande me a check made out in the right amount, or I'll slap a labor lien on this outfit and shut it down so tight it will squeak!"

"Indeed! Magnum will put up a bond to cover the amount and be drilling again inside of one tower."

"Of course," agreed Wireline. "And I know where I can get the money advanced the minute the Magnum bond is up. When court sets I'll be glad to show up the company for the kind it is." He knew Magnum couldn't afford such adverse advertising. So did Plenty Whiskers.

"Oh, well," he reconsidered. "That little amount isn't worth the trouble. I'll send your check out by Bill Grove tomorrow." He turned his back and left the derrick house.

Wireline fully expected to get fired after his clash with Plenty Whiskers, but he was kept on. He began to hope that maybe on second thought Plenty Whiskers might have decided to work out some sort of compromise. At least Wireline was grateful for being allowed to keep his job. He had plenty time to get a machine on his lease to validate it; and how he did need the money he was earning.

However, no word came from Plenty Whiskers during the ten days it took to drill in the Rocky Butte well and put it into production.

A few hours after he had settled up with Magnum for his services as a driller, he discovered that the real reason for leaving him on the job had been to keep him out of the way. Plenty Whiskers had used the time to lease for a ninety-day period, every available oil well drilling outfit in the section within reach of Wireline's limited time and funds.

Wireline's desperate search only confirmed his estimate of Plenty Whiskers. The Magnum trouble shooter was a thorough man. And since Rick Spencer had refused to write an extension clause into the oil lease, ninety days was all the grace Wireline had. Plenty Whiskers seemed safely on top. Then the driller remembered he had noticed a

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

little water well spudder in the Brownsville junk yard.

Hidden behind a mountain of old culch, the little gasoline engined outfit was still there. Even in its heyday, it was only intended to drill to depths under a hundred feet. But Wireline had once worked on one of this make and knew its capabilities from start to finish.

A careful examination revealed that neglect more than use had landed the spudder among the junk. Fundamentally, it was still sound. Wireline purchased it for seventy-five dollars.

IT TOOK a week of furious work and another fifty dollars to remount the spudder on its tracks and put it in usable condition. Wireline was going over it for a final check-up, when Rick Spencer came into the junk yard wearing a spurious expression of suffering martyrdom.

"For a man who looks and talks as honest as you do, you sure slickered me good," he accused aggrievedly.

Wireline didn't lose his temper. He knew what was behind the accusation and had been expecting this visit.

"In what way?" he asked.

"You knew all the time about that fault and beat me down to a two-hundred-fifty-dollar bonus. Why, that lease is worth thousands!"

"When we get oil your royalty will make you a million," countered Wireline.

"Yes. And if we don't get oil, all I pull down is two hundred and fifty dollars! If I had the lease free, I could get a lot of money for it. I'll give you twenty-five hundred dollars for your bargain."

The familiar argument and the offer gave Wireline a clue to the source. Plenty Whiskers must have heard about the spudder and had sicced the rancher on him in an effort to head him off. This evidence that Plenty Whiskers was worried stiffened Wireline's sagging morale.

"My oil lease on the Bar-2 is not for sale at any price," he said with a finality that forbade haggling.

Rick stood with his angry, frustrated gaze going over the little machine.

"You think you're going to move that thing on the Bar-2 and hold the lease with it?" he went into the second objective of his visit.

"What do you care?"

"What do I care? I'll show you what I care! Your contract calls for an *adequate* drilling rig. You put that toy on my ranch and you've broken your lease!"

"My contract calls for an adequate drilling outfit on the ground within ninety days after date of signing," corrected Wireline. "Till then I can drill with a carpenter's brace and bit, if I feel like it."

"I'll see about that!" shouted Rick. He left the yard and made an ostentatious visit to his lawyer.

It had been Wireline's intention to hire men to help with the test. Since the Deckerton bank failure, that was out. Any help he had would have to become his partners with an interest in the oil lease. Hal Suthland who had once dressed tools for him and was now a citizen of Brownsville, was the only man within reach he was willing to accept into such a close association. He went to sound him out.

Hal was an oil field natural. He had quit the business and settled in Brownsville to stop his wife's nagging over her objections to the nomadic life of an oil field worker and the lack of educational advantages for the children. Recognizing her rights, but hating the cost, with a battered truck he was squeezing out an existence for himself and family. His square face shortened and the scowl of frustration that was beginning to make permanent lines on his forehead smoothed out as he listened to Wireline's proposition.

"You mean if I'll furnish my truck and water tank, haul what supplies we need and dress tools on this job, you'll cut me in your Bar-2 oil lease for ten percent straight across the board?"

"That's right."

"Oh boy! Oh boy!" Hal knew all about the lease and fault. What was just as allurring, he knew Wireline's ability. His tired eyes squinted into a smile and he rubbed his work hardened hands together while he harkened to temptation. If they hit, he could put his wife and children in a comfortable home. She wouldn't care where he worked as long as she was not dragged from shack to shack.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You know my wife," he went on hesitatingly. "She'll raise hell if I backslide. Tell you what I'll do. If you can figger a way to furnish her supplies as well as feed me so I won't have to go home every day and have a fight, I'm with you."

"Don't you know a good gambler around here who'll furnish us the supplies we need for a two percent interest in the bet we've got?" inquired Wireline. "I've got plenty of blankets. You can sleep with me under the spudder."

"Le's go see Baldy Jake Mason who owns the Elite Market," suggested Hal. "He used to be a lease hound. I was talking to him the other day. He's just as homesick as I am."

BALDY JAKE, a little man who looked more like a Sunday school superintendent than a gambler, scratched his bald pate while he shoved a crate of wilted lettuce away with his foot. His mouth twisted into a sheepish grin.

"I'm a natural born sucker," he established his status. "But gullible as I am, two percent ain't enough on this thing. I'll have to have five percent, and I'll throw in the pile of lumber I've got up to the house to build me a garage and shop."

"You've either lost a pile of lumber or made a million dollars," accepted Wireline.

"I should have asked for ten percent," grinned Baldy. "Now what you do want out of the market?"

Wireline and Hal loaded the truck with lumber, groceries and such small tools as they could gather. They hitched the spudder behind and trundled out to the lease.

First they spotted the machine at a location Wireline had already picked. Then they threw off the truck's load. Hal returned to town for more lumber and a drum of gasoline. Wireline buckled into rigging the machine for spudding in.

The drilling outfit's little mast was too weak to handle what was required of it. Wireline and Hal replaced it with a forty foot tripod of steel well casing and cabled a heavy pulley to the top to serve as a crown-block to carry the drilling line and tools.

They buried heavy chunks of scrap iron for deadmen, and turnbuckled the spudder down to them. Otherwise, the weight of the tools with the dressed out ten-inch bit with which Wireline was starting a twelve-inch hole, would have yanked the little machine right up the tripod.

While Wireline tenderly nursed the little spudder along, Hal attended to whatever came to hand. He hauled water from the creek; and since they had no storage tank, he let the water set in the tank on the truck and connected it to the drilling water barrel with a hose. Handy with carpenter tools, he built a tiny cabin to house their supplies and in which to do their cooking.

When the cabin was finished, he took what remained of the lumber and built a derrick house for the spudder, complete with lazy bench. Looking five years younger, almost down to his real age, Hal hung the carpenter tools along the derrick house wall and gave all his very careful attention to the well.

Like most ambitious tooldressers, Hal had been learning to drill. He had progressed far enough so Wireline could turn the tools over to him and catch some sleep on the lazy bench, and be right at hand if Hal got into trouble and needed him. In this way, turn about, working and sleeping, they kept the tools moving day and night.

The hole began to cave badly. There was no casing to shut the soft earth from rolling in on the tools. A cave at this stage could delay the test into defeat. Wireline accepted the challenge because he had too. Backed by his skill and years of experience, with churning tools and whipping cable he fought the cave hand to hand, tower after tower. At last it gave up and he plastered off the slipping formation.

Red-eyed and exhausted from his long hours of battling, but with hope riding high again, Wireline turned the tools over to Hal, dropped to the lazy bench and went out like a light.

Wireline was praying that Plenty Whiskers wasn't familiar with this type of spudder and had no idea how fast it could dig. He wanted the Magnum trouble shooter to consider this drilling effort as a desperate gesture of activity on which to base a suit to hang onto the oil lease, after the ninety days of grace had expired. To make sure no Magnum spies had a chance to report progress to Plenty Whiskers, Wireline had Hal post no

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

trespass signs and keep everyone off the location.

Making hole at about the rate the driller figured, they reached the first Wall Creek sand and the expected small flow of water. They rigged up to case and started running a rickety string of eight-inch stuff, secretly bargained for and delivered in the night.

As they added joint after joint of the heavy casing to the weight hanging on the machine, Wireline ached with sympathy. He didn't see how the little outfit stood up under the strain. Yet the bottom hole bump of the landing casing finally came and the tiny machine gave an almost human groan of relief.

Sweat was running off both Wireline and Hal as they stood on opposite sides of the hole and grinned at each other. Impulsively Wireline reached out his hand and patted the gallant little engine.

"You've sure got guts," he praised. "I once knew a roustabout like you. He never had no idear when he was licked."

THEY hadn't seen a thing of Plenty Whiskers since spudding in. Wireline began to thing the trouble shooter really had been hoodwinked, or they would have heard from him before now. And Wireline had no illusions. While Plenty Whiskers preferred legal action and trickery, past violence pointing in his direction was far from reassuring.

It was Wireline's intention to drill the well in before the ninety days grace lapsed. The well had to be in, or else. No matter how near the objective the drill might be, the second the ninety days were up, Rick Spencer would be on hand with an injunction to stop the work on the plea that the rig was inadequate. Once it got into the courts, Wireline knew Magnum would keep it dragging until he was elminated. So he poured it on with all the motion the tools would take.

The first screw Wireline drilled after landing the casing, or what would have been a screw on a galloping rod outfit, he pulled the tools and bailed.

Many bailer loads of drill cuttings and water had turned the sump into a slimy, miniature, quagmire lake. After this latest bailing, the surface was ablaze with brilliant, rainbow colors, the first real oil showings of the test.

All along, both Wireline and Hal had been worried by lack of encouraging signs in the formations they had drilled. This alluring evidence gave them a lift.

The drill encountered a shell of lime rock. At least Wireline thought it was a shell, until it continued foot after foot and he began to detect puffs of wet gas from it. Then he became convinced that the formation between the Wall Creeks had pinched in here and he was already drilling the caprock over the second Wall Creek sand.

Wireline pulled the tools to bail and put on a fresh bit. He helped Hal powerhouse the worn bit to the forge outside for a dressing heat. As they straightened up, a bright flash on top of a foothill towering above them caught Wireline's eye.

A man with powerful glasses posted on that peak of advantage could look right down into the machine and see the cable drum. By watching the cable unspool and spool a few times as the tools were run in and out of the well, any experienced driller could estimate within a few feet of the depth of the hole. Wireline had a sudden conviction that Plenty Whiskers had been keeping close watch on their progress all the way.

"Hal," he said, "Plenty Whiskers has got a spy on top of that foothill using binoculars on us. I just saw the sun glint on the lenses."

"Why! The damned, underhanded, old buzzard!" swore Hal. "I'll put a whoa to that!" He raced to the cabin, got his shotgun, their only weapon, and sprinted for the foothill.

The sense of security that had been building up in Wireline was completely dissipated. As he returned to the derrick house and started the tools hammering, he marveled at his stupidity in overlooking so obvious a danger.

Hal returned, stood his shotgun in a corner and flung a resentful glance at the cable drum as though he blamed it for the betrayal.

"The spy lit out before I got near the place," he reported sourly. "By the looks of things he's been practically camping up there."

"It's my fault," Wireline shouldered the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

blame. "My horse sense, if any, must have stampeded quite a spell back."

"Maybe you ain't noticed it," commented Hal, "but I've been here all the time, same as you."

WIRELINE ignored Hal's attempt to share the guilt. He said, "I've been thinking. Plenty Whiskers' spy can't know about the thinning of the formation between the Wall Creeks. Our ninety days still has a week to run. It must look to Plenty Whiskers like he still has lots of time; and he sure ain't going to step outside the law as long as he figgers there's a chance of us hitting a snag without his help. Plain arithmetic says he can afford to give us a couple or three days more."

"How soon you figger we'll be through the caprock?" asked Hal.

"Unless it's ungodly thick, we ought to make it by midnight."

The cloud of worry lifted from Hal.

"In that case, what are we growing gray about?" he grinned. "Even I know enough about Plenty Whiskers to figger he ain't going to stick his neck out only as a last resort. Besides, now we're warned, we'll be on the watch for tricks."

Darkness fell and Hal started the motorcycle engine that propelled the castoff car magneto, and which had been converted into an eleectric light plant. He then picked up his shotgun, went out into the shadows and lurked beyond the circle of light, while Wireline battered deeper and deeper into the caprock.

Around ten o'clock, the muck in the hole became so thick the tools failed to drop properly. Wireline pulled them to bail. As he hung the string back out of the way, he could smell gas on the bit. Because his ears were keyed for it, far below he could hear the faint rumble of straining pressure. The drill was nearly through the caprock, and all signs pointed to something big below.

While Wireline could pull and hang back the tools alone, he was unable to double as a tooldresser when it came to bailing.

"Bail!" he shouted and was surprised at a hysterical note in his voice.

Hal came in from his ambush. He leaned his shotgun against the derrick wall, unhooked the bailer from the tieback and dumped three runs in the sumpbox. His short nose wrinkled as he sniffed the air, and his freckles stood out golden on a paling skin as he listened to the murmur far below. The promise of great rewards was getting to him in much the same manner as it was affecting Wireline.

He had just hooked the bailer back and turned to Wireline who was waiting for him to stab the tools in the hole, when four weird figures stepped into the derrick house. They were clothed and masked with burlap into shapeless, faceless beings. The two in the lead covered Wireline and Hal with heavy six-shooters.

"Reach!" The explosive order given in an obviously disguised voice didn't come from either of the gun toters. It was issued by a short, heavy man holding a squib formed by lashing sticks of dynamite into a bundle, and from which a fuse protruded. Tied to the squib was around a hundred feet of cotton clothesline with a wire hook on the other end. The fourth member of the party carried two sledge hammers.

CAUGHT flat-footed, Wireline and Hal could do nothing but obey and raise their hands.

Singing noises buzzed in Wireline's head. A tearing anger at the way he had made blunder after blunder boiled up in him. Soothed by his own stupid reasoning, he had stood around with his head in the clouds counting his unhatched chickens and let Plenty Whiskers close in on him. It was inexcusable.

The blasting of the prize out of his hands just as he was about to unwrap it was enough to sink him. But even worse was the knowledge that he had lured Hal and Baldy into this with rosy promises and faith in his judgment, and then let them down. That was going to haunt him the balance of his life.

"Get back against the wall!" gargled the leader. His burlap encased head jerked toward the wall where the carpenter tools hung.

Wireline hesitated. He weighed his chances of hurling himself on his guard and living long enough to wrest the gun away and turn the tables. Hal was certain to follow his lead and probably get killed. He

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

couldn't risk it. Along with the tooldresser he stepped back.

The leader laid the squib down by Hal's shotgun and took one of the sledges from the man holding them. The pair went to work on the machine. They reduced the engine to junk. The spokes were knocked out of the flywheel. Pieces of shattered castings rattled to the ground.

Sweat stuck Wireline's shirt to his straining back muscles. Every blow of the sledges fell on his conscience. Then there was his feeling for the sweetly running little engine that had served him so faithfully.

The spudder reduced to a wreck that would require more time and money to repair than Wireline and his partners had, the sledging stopped. The leader picked up the squib and lighted the fuse. Rapidly he lowered the charge of dynamite into the hole by the clothesline.

WIRELINE needed no blueprint. Plenty Whiskers was acting in his usual thorough manner. Not only was the machine wrecked, but the hole was going to be blasted shut at around a hundred feet. No one would be able to prove it was deeper in time to do any good, even if the cost wasn't prohibitive. The oil lease was certain to revert to Rick Spencer, and there was no doubt but what Plenty Whiskers had it tied up for Magnum.

Cornered, Wireline's eyes roved in desperation, looking for an out. His gaze touched a carpenter's drawknife hanging on the wall, and he went into action. His long arm shot out. His fingers curled around the drawknife's handle.

"Hold it, or I'll down you!" warned his guard.

But the driller was already in the middle of his leap for the well, his awkward weapon swinging. He clipped the clothesline and let the freed dynamite squib with the burning fuse plummet to the bottom of the well.

Wireline flung himself on the planks of the derrick floor in an effort to escape the promised bullet. Instead of shooting after it was already too late, the guard thrust the gun muzzle with considerable force against Wireline's spine.

"You was lucky that time," he said. "Maybe I'll blow your liver out anyway! How about it boss?"

"Might as well let him die a natural death for all the good it'll do now," growled the leader with caustic disgust. "Take that thing away from him and keep him there on the floor while I go back to the car for more powder and line. Plug him if he tries to get up!" He started for the door.

There was a dull jar as the squib detonated four hundred feet below. It was followed by a roar and commotion all out of keeping with the size of the charge.

"Wh-e-e-e!" screeched the hole.

Rocks flew from the well as though fired from subterranean artillery. Mud shot toward the stars. Behind all came a shining column of oil. It rose like a solid green tree trunk to the crownblocks and then mushroomed to fall back in a thundering shower. As Wireline had hoped, the dynamite had finished breaking through the weakened caprock and the well was blowing in.

Directly under the shower, Wireline, Hal and the wrecking crew were drenched with oil. The raiding party was thrown into confusion. It was apparent that none of them had any idea how to cope with what had been turned loose.

Wireline, already up on his hands and knees, left the derrick floor in a prodigious leap. He landed on the back of the leader. His two-hundred-twenty pounds of bone and muscle flattened his victim with stunning force. He completed the knockout with a wicked punch to the jaw.

Springing clear, Wireline whirled to meet his guard who was rushing him, gun clubbed. But when the guard saw the huge driller, thick fingers hooked, plunging through the curtain of oil to meet him, he lost his nerve. Afraid to fire his oil-filled gun, he dropped it and dodged quickly out the door.

The man in charge of the sledges was still standing in stunned inaction. He came to life when he saw Wireline make a bound in his direction. Bolting into the open he vanished into the same dark that had gathered in the fleeing ex-gunman.

HAL had mounted his guard the same second Wireline had pounced on the leader. He was far smaller, but fury made

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

up for his lack of weight. Already he had his man choked into submission.

Each dragging a prisoner, Wireline and Hal left the rain of oil and went to the cabin lighted by their crude, home-made electric light plant which was still faithfully supplying juice. They stripped the disguises from their captives.

Wireline's prisoner was Rick Spencer! Hal's man was one of Rick's cowhands.

The driller was not surprised. He had immediately noticed that the wrecking crew had not recognized the symptoms of a well about to come in. Even then it was plain to him that they were unskilled hands who had been coached for this one job. With their identity revealed, it was easy to guess who had done the coaching. And Rick, feeling as he did about the bonus money, would be a willing tool.

Fixing a stern eye on the humiliated, oil-smeared rancher, Wireline went to work on him while he was still badly upset. He painted a black picture of the consequences his lawless act could have on his fortune and personal liberty. Then he dangled a chance to escape before his eyes. Rick leaped for it like a drowning man grasping at a rope.

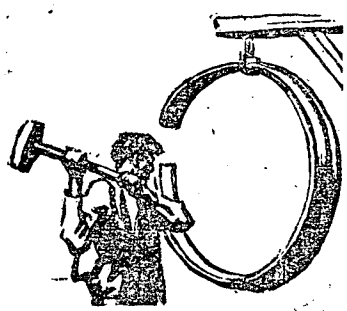
Later, in town, Wireline called Plenty Whiskers out of bed to answer his phone. He said, "A misguided son and three of his cowhands wrecked my machine out at the Bar-2 test. When he tried to plug the hole with a dynamite squib, he had the bad luck to drop it all the way and blow the well in. Oil is pouring over everything. With no machine, I've no way to control it."

A strangled sound at the other end of the wire interrupted the driller.

"Pull your whiskers out of your teeth so I can hear you better," requested Wireline, and then continued, "I took this feller I mentioned prisoner. At my suggestion he was glad to write a full confession. In it he stated you was so interested in the test you was willing to spend time and money to get it for Magnum. Feeling the way he says you do, I'm wondering if you'd do me the favor of sending a crew with one of them machines you've got under lease out to my location and control my oil? Whatever else you need you can fetch from the Magnum warehouse." Without waiting for a reply, he hung up.

"You figger that treacherous old goat is going to help *us* out?" inquired Hal incredulously.

"He'll bring the machine and crew in person," grinned Wireline. "Plenty Whiskers Barclay is one smart cookie. He knows I've just offered him an olive branch, and that I'm still willing to deal with Magnum. Best of all, the more he checks up on this, the more positive he'll get that he better play fair with us or something will drop on him with a disagreeable squash."



PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE BLINKER

WITH the bases full against you, with the third pitcher of the inning in there doing his best to get the final out, and your club two runs ahead, with the opposition getting their eye on the ball, where do you find a manager?

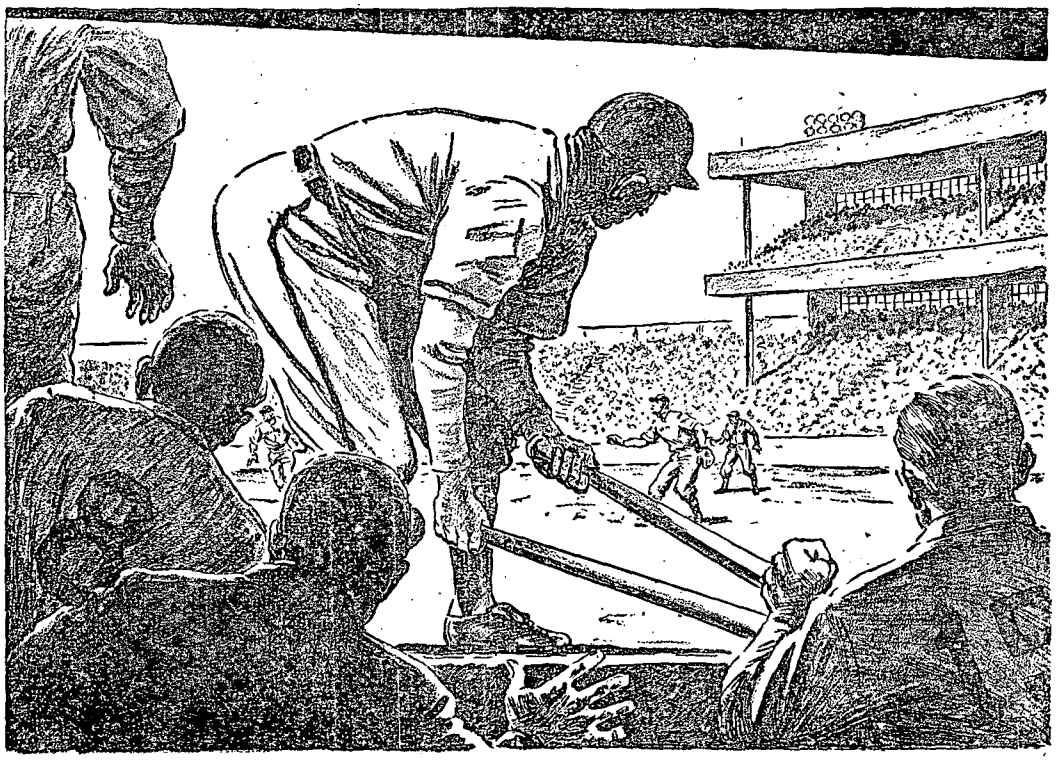
If he was Johnny Sproul of the Gazelles, he'd be on the top dugout step, crouched as though ready to run out on the field himself, one gnarled hand, that used to make a good snap throw from second base, massaging the back of his head with its iron-gray hair while the fingers of the other hand hooked under the belt of his white-trimmed-with-red Gazelle uniform.

The game was with the Green Sox, and though it was only late May, it was important. The Green Sox were important, twice pennant-winners in the last three years. With the Bears, the Sox were one-two, with the Gazelles close behind, but not able for some years to grab top money.

Sproul leaned forward dutifully. Henshaw, the left-handed reliefer, swung his arm around by way of first base, and the pill screwed into the plate. The crack of the bat meeting ball was not clean. The sphere bounced and dribbled down the third-base line. It was a comparatively easy play for a big-league third-baseman. And then, as he thought of it afterward, Sproul watched what happened as though in a dream.

Trigger McCoy, Gazelle hot-corner guardian, charged the ball, bent to make the scoop. Sproul thought Trigger had it until he saw the white sphere trickle off the outstretched glove and bounce out into left

Great Baseball Comes Out of the Eyes and Arms and Legs—Also the Heart and Head!



PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

By MALCOLM MURCHIE

Author of "Now Battling for the Broncos," etc.

field. Two Green Sox scored on the play, and the Gazelle reliefer was so unnerved that he fed a fat one to the next Greenie batter. It went for a base-clearing triple and the ball game.

The post mortem was painful. The players trooped by twos and threes into the dressing-room. The atmosphere was funereal. Trigger McCoy, head down, chucked his glove into his locker and undressed without a word. The Gazelle manager had it on the tip of his mind to call McCoy into his office, but one look at the third-baseman's face stopped him. Trigger looked white and drawn. He was taking enough criticism—from himself.

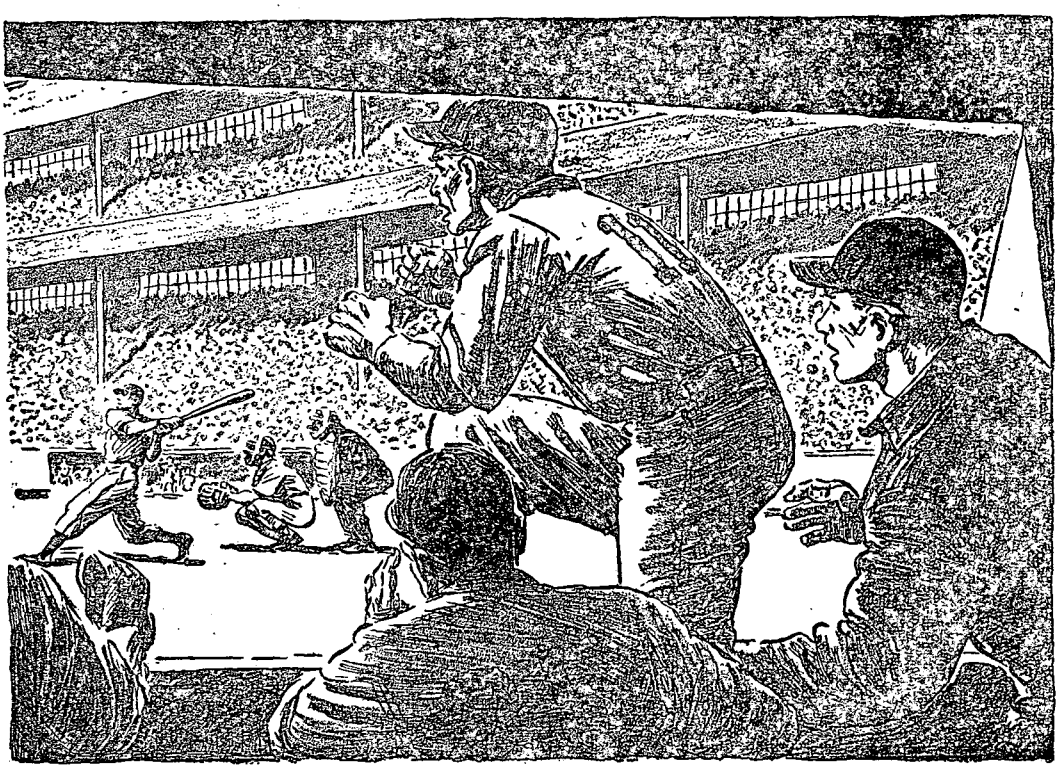
Sproul clapped his hands together.

"Tomorrow's another day, boys! Forget this one!"

IN HIS picture-lined office later, Sproul thought his ball club over. Thought it over against the league and against its chances of getting right in there at the top. He had a good outfit. It could run; it took that extra base. Good defensive strength, fine outfield and fine pitching. The infield was . . . well, not so many years ago, it had been the best infield in the league. That was before some of the boys took time off to play a different kind of game for Uncle Sam.

Essentially, it was the same infield. A few years older, but First Baseman Burdett, at thirty-five, was the oldest and he still had plenty of good baseball in him. Trigger McCoy was the weak link. Try as he would, Sproul couldn't escape that conclusion. Because the Trigger was Johnny's kind of ball player, he'd liked him when he'd seen him first in the late thirties up from the Tuscaloosa Tigers with a big minor-league noise behind him.

Sproul remembered well how the Brady brothers, Gazelle owners, had been reaching out for help on the blistering September



PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

trail. The Gazelles were one jump (like any animal after which they were named should be) ahead of the second-place Panthers. There was a hole in the infield. Trigger McCoy was brought up to plug it. He did. He walked out on Stadium Field with the banners snapping over a capacity thirty-five thousand crowd, kicked the earth around third base a few times, punched his glove, crouched over and played a whale of a defensive game while weighing in with a couple of tearing singles.

McCoy had been twenty-two then, and that was eleven years ago. But thirty-three is just the prime of most ball players. And yet, indisputably, without paying any attention to the cat-calls of the Section Five Club back of third base, without reading the daily press and without listening to the radio sports commentators, all of whom kept riding him for not jerking McCoy out of there, yet the evidence of his own eyes told him that the Trigger was over the hill as an infielder, and that the other side of that hill must be pretty steep, for McCoy was going down it awfully fast.

Johnny was a little hurt about one thing. A dignified man in his early fifties, he had no family but was married to the great game of baseball. He was as secure with the Brady brothers as a manager can be. He'd always tried to be a father to his boys as well as a manager. He knew the Trigger had something between the ears, as well as a strong arm and good legs. He wondered why the Trigger didn't come to him and say—

"Johnny, I stink and I'm getting worse! What do *you* think's wrong?"

That the Trigger didn't was as much a sadness and a disappointment as McCoy's declining quality of play. Because the time would come—and it was not too far off—when Buck Mason, the Gazelle catcher and field captain, would march up to the home-plate umpire with the opening lineup—and Trigger McCoy's name wouldn't be on it! That was in the cards. It would be in the future.

Johnny Sproul, who was full of the emotion, knew, nevertheless, that you can't run a ball club on sentiment, and he was responsible to those two men who sat in the field box back of home plate. Those two men who'd trusted him and who'd certainly given him a square deal, to whom owning this ball club meant everything and who expected the best from it. And more than that—to each and every one of the people who plunked down their quarters and fifty-cent pieces and dollars and came in the gates—the fans. The ones who yelled for you and the ones who yelled against you and yet with their yelling kept baseball alive.

THE season was little over a month old, but the Gazelles lacked something. They'd gotten off to a good lead by superlative pitching, but they'd been sliding the last two weeks and were in third row. There was nothing for it. Sproul doodled at the pad on his desk and looked out the small window of his office. He could see the outfield and the stands ringing it in the dusk of gathering twilight. McCoy would have to come out of there. He'd hoped Trigger would work out of it. Ball players often get off to a bad start. But this was more than a bad start—it was terrible! Too bad, but . . . .

There was a soft knock on his office door. Sproul come-in'd. He thought all his ball players had long since dressed and gone home.

"Hi, Trigger!"

It was a surprise, just as though if you think hard enough, the subject of your thoughts . . . .

McCoy sat opposite him, and his face was still drawn. Tortured, Sproul thought.

"I'm sorry about that one today, Johnny," the third baseman said.

"Forget it, Trigger! Forget it. Those things happen. That's baseball!"

McCoy shook his head.

"The things that've been happening have been pretty much happening to *me*. Johnny, I guess you've been thinkin' I don't belong in there now."

Sproul was glad it had come up this way.

"You'll get the old push, Trigger! It's early in the season yet!"

As he talked to the third baseman, Sproul noticed the other man's face. Worried, it was, and over the left eye the small scar lit up. Other men had brought back much worse things from the war. McCoy was one of the lucky ones. The story was he'd been pinked by a small piece of shrapnel.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

McCoy spoke again; he wanted the brutal truth.

"You want me outta there, don't you now?"

Sproul thought for a time. Then he nodded his head.

"I'd like to try it, Trigger. We expect a good deal of this club this year. The Bradys and I and you fellows—all of us!"

McCoy nodded again, kept his head lower than Sproul would like to have seen.

"I know all that. Okay, Skipper! Get me outta there and I hope it'll help the club."

"You'll come back, Mac," Sproul said with a heartiness he didn't feel, getting up and slapping the ball player on the shoulder.

McCoy smiled a little wryly.

"I just want to ask you one favor, Johnny. When I ask you—it's not gonna be right away so don't worry—but when I ask you, 'Skipper, can I get back in?' I want you to give me a chance, even if it's just that once. But lemme have another shot at it!"

"Why, sure, Trigger!" Sproul boomed. "The fans and I know there's a lotta ball playing left in Trigger McCoy!"

It was the sort of thing he had to say, but he wondered, looking into the other's face, if either of them or those photographed baseball immortals looking down from the wall sides, believed a word of it.

A BALL game looks different on the bench just as it looks different from the press box or from the stands. Trigger sat on the wood of the Gazelle dugout seat back of third base and looked out across the field. During a ball game out there on the grass, McCoy knew what to do with his hands. Here on the bench, it was different. He snappped his knuckles. He gripped his hands together, fussed with his uniform and pulled his ear.

The play went on before him, and it was as though he were looking at a movie—only the sounds of the stands were more noticeable now. The smell of the soft summer air, an occasional whiff of pipe smoke from the box seats back of the dugout, hot dogs, coffee . . . and all the time the crowd. You don't hear it when you're actually playing. It's just you and your eight guys against nine other ball players. No strangers in it except the men in blue—the umpires. You did your job and expected the boys around you to do theirs.

The sun was high and hot, and McCoy blinked as he looked at its brightness. In the last half of the ninth with the Gazelles two runs down, Sproul leaned on the dugout apron and looked down the line of his reserves. The home-team pitcher was up next, and it was the spot for a pinch-hitter.

"How about it, McCoy?" the Mgr. said softly.

Trigger looked down at the tops of his baseball shoes. There was a fast-ball pitcher in there, and the sun had faded beneath the rim of the stadium. He'd be hard to hit.

"All right, Trigger, let's go!" Sproul decided.

The benched third baseman got up, took himself a palm of dirt, rubbed his hands together and then on his uniformed thighs. The three bats he swung to loosen his arm and shoulder muscles seemed like six. He threw two away and stepped into the batter's box. From the press box behind and above home plate, he heard sounds that drew his eye.

He looked up briefly and saw the columnist, Joey Orchard, making a face in his direction and waving a hand derisively. Orchard was one of the most influential and widely read baseball writers in the business. He was a small, irritable, insistent man, and the words he authored in his daily column, syndicated across the country, were the same as the man himself. Orchard was a great second-guesser, and some of his second-guesses looked pretty good.

For a long time, he'd been "on" the Gazelles. He referred often to the Gazelle setup as the "failure franchise of the Big Leagues," lambasted what he called "its decrepit and aging leadership." Hed been particularly vociferous on the McCoy case.

"A lot of men went to war," were Joey's syndicated words, "and that's no reason to sentimentalize over them when they come back, to the detriment of their fellows, and in the case of a sports team, the club they play for and its pennant chances. But there's one manager in the Big Leagues today whose name begins with S who doesn't feel that way, and if the emotional flag-waving at his ball park continues, the fol-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lowers of his team—doubtless diminishing in number rapidly—can be very sure there won't be any other kind of flag—pennant variety—waving over that stadium!"

Like all ball players—and don't believe otherwise—McCoy read the papers and took in the opinion crusades, criticisms and commendations of that powerful clique—of whom none was more powerful than Joey Orchard—the baseball writers. A ball player reads these paragraphs, and if they're about him, he's particularly interested. If they're complimentary, he's particularly pleased. If they're not, he gets so he shrugs his shoulders and says, "So what! You can't please everybody!" But underneath it all, he is kind of hurt.

McCoy, as he took his stance at the plate, could feel Joey Orchard's eyes on him, and for a moment, they seemed all that was important. His wife, Juney, was in the stands; the Brady brothers, his manager and his teammates; but McCoy felt Joey's baleful eyes on him as though there was something electric between them. The others were indulgent, sympathetic, helpful; but Ochard, as he put it in his column, "I've got your number, McCoy, and you're through!" That was hard to take.

THE first pitch whistled in, and Trigger took it. It was on the outside corner. He shook his head and blinked. He'd hardly seen the ball it had come in so swiftly. The next throw split the heart of the plate, and even as Trigger started his swing, he heard the thud of the ball in the catcher's mitt and knew he'd looked like the rankest busher. The stands gave a hum of disappointment and there was a raucous catcall from somewhere—Joey Orchard!

The third baseman stepped away from the plate. He looked over at his dugout, but Sproul had sent him up to take or hit away as he saw fit. There was no signal from there. The third-base coach clapped his hands together.

"C'mon, Trigger Old Boy! You c'n do it! All this fellow got's a fast ball!"

It was a grim little joke—"All this fellow's got's a fast ball!"

McCoy stepped back in. The opposing pitcher wasted one low and then came back with another cannonball straight down the middle. Trigger felt sick as he swung uselessly. He stepped out again, knocked the dirt out of his cleats and looked around as though he'd seen something that would help him. There was nothing. Juney, sitting in her seat near the Brady brothers, seemed indistinct and miles away.

He was in again. For the third strike, the pitcher fooled him completely. He bent a fast, shoulder-level curve right at McCoy, and Trigger ducked away, hitting the dirt in a heap. But he'd miscalculated the trajectory of the ball. It curved neatly over the inside corner of the plate, and the umpire bawled at him,

"STEE—rike! You're out!"

There was other noise from the press box, but Trigger never looked up as he walked downcast to the bench, trailing his bat. Nobody said anything to him in the dressing-room, and that made it worse. They don't do that when they feel sorry for you. If somebody snaps or snarls, somehow it helps—but there was just silence.

Joey Orchard was particularly noisey in the next day's press:

"The Gazelles not only have a fourth-rate, blinking amateur who is their only third baseman, and apparently pinch-hitter—they have a manager of unaccustomed poor judgment! Second division, here come the Gazelles!"

It all came true. By the Fourth of July—midway in the pennant races—the Gazelles were solidly in fifth place, and the fans who cared were shaking their heads dolefully and saying with scant conviction, "Wait'll next year."

But not Joey Orchard.

"Why is The Blinker, McCoy, being carried, Manager Johnny Sproul and Owners Brady? There's other dead wood on your club, but get rid of this joke of a ball player and bring somebody else up or you'll drop even lower!"

THREE weeks later, the Gazelles were in sixth, toying with the idea of falling to seventh.

During a mid-August western tour the Brady brothers—two mild-mannered, unaggressive baseball fanatics who'd inherited

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the club and their love of it from their father-owner—received a personal call from Joey Orchard. The fiery columnist, utilizing his prerogative as a representative of the public—which title he enjoyed assuming in print and vocally—made mention in his lines the next day of how he had been rejected by the "Age Trust, the Failure Franchise that is the Gazelles, whose owners were more interested in the past than the present performance of their club and its future achievements!"

In other words, in their old-world, gentlemanly style, the Brady brothers had slammed the door on one, Joey Orchard, and his explosive, vitriolic demands.

The ball players heard and were silent. The fans were split in their sentiments. A sixth-place club does not inspire loyalty and a huge following. Sproul's reaction was to seek the Bradys out. The manager was closeted with them all of a rainy afternoon. When he came out, reporters asked him,

"Skipper, are you fellows thinking over Orchard's suggestions?"

Sproul chose his words carefully.

"The Gazelle ownership and managership will decide quuestions of Gazelle policy, and *not* Mister Orchard!"

That was printed up big and put Joey's literary and literal blood pressure up even higher.

Caught in the middle of all this was the figure of Third Baseman Trigger McCoy. No question about one thing—the decline of the Gazelles had coincided with the benching of Trigger McCoy, or The Blinker, as Orchard now derisively called the third-sacker.

Sproul, a man who'd built much of his reputation on his expert handling of other men, pondered the McCoy problem, often deep into the night. It was a strange contradiction here, and there were aspects that perplexed him more than anything ever had in better than thirty years of following the diamond game.

Trigger was usually first man out for practice sessions in the morning. When these were not required, McCoy would still be out. It was one of Johnny's coaches that broke the first bit of startling news to him not long after the initial benching. It seemed that McCoy was practicing his batting from the lefthander's side of the plate. Sproul frowned but said nothing.

In regular sessions, Trigger caused some comment and jokes from his teammates by switch-hitting—something he'd never done before. The third baseman's laconic answer was:

"Well, if you can't hit 'em one way, try another!"

Then there was another bit of news on the McCoy matter. This came from Trainer Werzeck.

"Say Johnny!" the veteran trainer called Sproul at his home early one a.m. Werzeck had a habit, when the club was not on the road, of getting out to the stadium early. There were always things to be done around the clubhouse, even if a batting or fielding session wasn't scheduled.

"Johnny," Werzeck confided over the phone, "Trigger McCoy is out here with a bullpen catcher—practicing *pitching!*"

That tied it. Here's a guy, the Mgr. thought to himself, who seems to be slipping as a player. A guy who was just about the best hot-corner guardian in the league for years, and instead of working at his trade, is trying everything else—fussing with his batting stance, taking up pitching like he thought he was a Bucky Walters!

THAT was the reason for the meeting with Juney McCoy, Trigger's wife. Sproul made it a strict policy not to discuss his ball players' ability with anyone other than his coaches or the players themselves. This situation called for more heroic methods. They had just returned home from a trip to Philadelphia. Down there, in the second game of a double-header, hopelessly lost in the sixth inning, the Trigger had come and said,

"Johnny, 'member what you promised me? Well . . . I want that chance now! I want to go in and take a shot at it!"

Sproul had nodded gladly and motioned to his coach to make the change at third base.

"No," Trigger admonished quietly. "I wanna pitch, Johnny!"

Sproul was an old hand at covering up his feelings, and the Gazelles were behind

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

eight to one. He knew the ribbing he'd take from the papers.

"Okay, McCoy, it's yours, and good luck to you!"

Trigger finished out the game. He had determination and plenty of swift in his arm, but he'd never be a Bucky Walters. The final score wasn't eight to one against them . . . it was fifteen to one, and everybody —led by Joey Orchard—made horrible outcries against this latest desperation move of the sagging Gazelles.

Labor Day was just around the corner, and Sproul, unwilling to tuck his problem away for a winter, came right to the point.

"June," he said, facing the slight and pretty brunette Mrs. McCoy. "What's the matter with Trigger? What's your slant?"

He saw then that McCoy's troubles had not been only on the ball field. The girl's dark eyes filled with tears.

"I don't know, Mister Sproul. I just don't know!"

"Trigger is thirty-three," the manager hurried on, embarrassed by her show of emotion. "Thirty-three isn't old for a ball player. He was away for . . . how long? Two, three years?"

She nodded.

"Before he went away, he was one of the best in the Majors. Trigger's always been a particular favorite of mine, June. I've talked to him," Johnny went on. "I can't seem to get anything out of him. It's as though this thing were happening and he couldn't admit or didn't want to admit it. I don't mean he's insubordinate or that he's shirking. That's not the story. On the other hand, there're things that're said. You saw the Joey Orchard column a week ago where he mentioned he and some other newspapermen had seen the Trigger with Doc Hyler! I don't need to tell you, June, that Hyler is doctor and trainer of another major-league club—one of our bitterest rivals!

"I'd go down with Trigger all the way, but Orchard made some snide remarks about selling out to the enemy, and when I asked the kid about it, he just shrugged his shoulders.

"Juney, I don't mean to pry into things, but you know, when ball players are off the ball field and not practicing, they're usually found in certain places—at a movie or at the fights or sitting around the hotel lobby playing cards. Trigger was a great one for all that in the old days. Now . . . now . . . well, nobody seems to *see* him!

"If you won't think I'm a fresh, inquisitive old man, June . . . how is it from your end of things? What's the Trigger like with you, and what does he do with his spare time? I'm thinking all of this may be upstairs," and Sproul tapped his head. "There's a psychological twist to this business somewhere, and I'm damn well going to find it out!"

But Mrs. McCoy just sat there and looked at him, and her big, dark eyes filled up with tears again.

"I don't know," she said finally. "I can't answer you. What you've said, I know too. But I don't know where he goes, Mister Sproul. Wherever it is, it's not with me!"

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"He doesn't even take me to the movies anymore!"

Juney dropped her head and fumbled with her gloves nervously. Sproul, on the trail of something here, pushed himself forward.

"Look, tell me to shut up, June, 'cuz it isn't really my business. . . . yet it is, I think you'll see. How about you and Trigger? Do you . . . I mean . . . does he. . . .?"

June's small chin trembled, but her mouth was firm and her head came up when she spoke as she helped him out.

"I go right on loving him, Mister Sproul. As much as ever . . . maybe more, and I think . . . I think Trigger loves me. I hope he does and I know he worries about the Gazelles and his job. What else is troubling him, I can't tell you because . . . well, because he doesn't tell *me* and that hurts a lot!"

Johnny was at her side in an instant, his gnarled hand solicitously on her shoulder.

"Thanks a lot, June, for coming in, and let me tell *you* something. You and I—you and I together, June. We're gonna see the Trigger through this together, whatever it is!"

She gave him a tiny hand, looked up at him and said, "Thank you so much, Mister Sproul," and her eyes meant it.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE Labor Day weekend signalled the ball players' ordeal of double-headers on three consecutive days. The Gazelles were tired; they were dispirited and thin on the bench. Sproul stood back of the cage on Saturday watching his boys take batting practice.

McCoy was experimenting lefty from his normal right hand. Either way the Trigger had a hitch in his swing that was totally unlike the effortless style that had been his trademark for years and gave him a .302 lifetime batting average in the majors. McCoy lunged at the ball. He seemed uncertain in his judgment—signs of a ball player who has lost confidence in himself.

The pitchers in batting practice put little on their throws. The idea is to groove the ball to let the sluggers adjust their timing. Still, McCoy was not meeting the spheroid squarely.

Trigger left the cage, and another Gazelle took his place. The big clock in center field said eleven-forty-five. First game was scheduled at one-thirty. Sproul ambled over to where McCoy was standing.

"Trigger? How about going in for the first game?"

McCoy looked up, startled.

"Skipper, I was just gonna ask you. I've got sumpin' . . . sumpin' awful important I've got to do the middle of today. I'm askin' you to excuse me. I'll be back in uniform for you the second game."

If there was one thing that made Sproul angry . . . but a look at the other man's face softened his annoyance. He had a feeling the whole thing was rushing towards a climax. But Sproul didn't argue with the look on Trigger's face.

He said gruffly, "Okay, McCoy. It's not customary. You're under contract to this ball club, and I like my men available when we're playin' games—especially games as important as these! In your case I'll make an exception . . . just this once!"

Then he went back into the clubhouse, noticing that McCoy went to the dressing-room, there to change into street clothes. Sproul sat and doodled. He was supposed to be working out his batting order for the opening game, but he'd already decided that in his head.

The Green Sox had this pennant race sewed up. Now, at the Labor Day weekend, they were fourteen and a half games ahead. The rest of the first division field was similarly strung out.

BUT the second division was a hodge-podge with but two and a half games separating the eighth place Pythons from the fifth place Bullies. The Gazelles were in a sixth-place tie with the Maroons, and with each of the four clubs playing six games over this weekend, it was bound to be a big one.

Joey Orchard had gone on record over and over again in his column, saying that the only question was whether with the Gazelles so bad, the Pythons might be a bit worse. At any rate, it would either be seventh or eighth for the Sproul men.

Johnny sat in his office, and the time passed. One of his coaches came in.

"Gotcha batting, Skipper? We're about set to go!"

Sproul heaved himself to his feet and walked out to the dugout. It was the Maroons today for two, and then four games with the Bullies Sunday and Monday.

"Where's McCoy?" the coach asked curiously. "I saw him leavin' the ball park in civvies."

"I excused him for the first game," Sproul replied laconically.

Unknown to anybody at the Gazelle's stadium but regular tenants of the press box was the simultaneous absence of none other than Joey Orchard. Joey, sharp-eyed as always, had spotted the tableau below on the field earlier as he'd sat upstairs dreaming up an angle for today's story.

So it happened that when Trigger McCoy left the field, dressed and came out the players' runway back of the stadium, Orchard was slinging along not far behind. The reporter was on the trail of something he felt might be big. He hated McCoy, for that player had been defended against *his* (Joey's) baseball judgment—both by his manager and the Gazelle owners.

Orchard comforted himself with the thought that eventually he would "get" McCoy with the goods; who knows?—"goods" enough to take to the Commissioner's office, for the rampant rumors of McCoy's strange

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

behavior and sudden decline in playing ability must have a basis in some strange fact!

Sproul's pitching corps was tired. The manager led off in the first game with his least-tired hurler. The game was one-one until the seventh, and then the Maroons made three runs out of a bobble by the Gazelle third baseman, a base on balls and a drive that just dropped into the right-field lower stands.

The Sproul men got a run back in the eighth, but it ended up four to two and the Maroons took over undisputed sixth place.

BETWEEN halves of the double-header, the men showered and changed into fresh uniforms in the Gazelle dressing-room—in silence as thick as the ointment Trainer Werzeck used on stiff arms and legs. The scoreboard showed that the Pythons had won, and it was as though the Gazelle ball players could smell the dank air of the cellar as it yawned open to receive them in their downward direction.

A few minutes before the start of the second game, the clubhouse door flew open, and Trigger McCoy came in. His face was stormy . . . so stormy that the other Gazelles, no longer much interested in anything, stopped even the doing of nothing to look up and watch.

McCoy motioned to Sproul, and the two men went into the manager's office. When the door was shut, the third baseman said,

"Better use me in this second game, Johnny! I won't be much use to you after this!"

Sproul nodded his head.

"Glad to have you in there, Trigger. Ya know, in all the years I've been in baseball, I've never had a last-place club. We lost the first one, in case you didn't know. I guess you don't wanna tell me what's up, Trigger?"

"Ask Joey Orchard!" the other man said between gritted teeth. His mouth was a hard line, and the skin over his cheekbones was very white.

More, Sproul noticed that unconsciously the third baseman kneaded the knuckles of his right hand.

"Get your uniform on, son," the manager ordered quietly and then he left for the dressing-room.

Just before the umpires called "Play ball!" for the second game, Sproul, in the Gazelle dugout, received some information he'd been waiting for. A stadium messenger, who was one of those used by the press box, relayed the news that one, Joey Orchard, had left the press box just before the beginning of the first game—just about the same time that McCoy had gone from the field, and said Mr. Orchard was now back in the baseball writers' pew sporting what appeared to be a newly acquired black eye and a particularly ugly temper.

Sproul gave his attention, then, to the game. There were two lefthanders working this one, and they were rough for the batters most of the way. The action, as in the first game, came towards the end. Sproul had consistently waved McCoy in from where he'd been playing on the outside grass, but Trigger shook him off.

McCoy's methods of stopping the several chances he'd had were more reminiscent of a first baseman than a third baseman. Certainly they were nothing like the old Trigger McCoy, whose ground-covering as well as his rifle arm had been the talk of the big leagues for years!

MCCOY now played every ball with extreme caution, and a few bounces before the spheroid reached him, he would go down on one knee, blocking the pellet with his body. A couple of times this saved what otherwise would have been an error as the ball bounced off his shoulder or chest. Only McCoy's clothes-line throw over to first—and there wasn't a better arm in baseball—nabbed the runner.

Top of the eighth, the Maroon cleanup hitter slammed a long double to center field. The next man struck out, but the third up for the inning dropped a bunt down the third-base line—and even as it was struck, Sproul knew that the runner would beat out McCoy's recovery and throw. Trigger was playing too far out to get back in despite his speed. The Maroon on second slid into third, and there were men on first and third, with one out.

Trigger went back to his position, pounding his glove angrily. Sproul went out to the mound then. He'd seen the shoulders of his

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

port-sider slump at this bad break. The kid had more promise than poise, and Johnny knew the limitations of his hurling corps well enough to know that this was the time to bring in Henshaw, the ringwise, right-handed veteran who had saved more runs than Gazelle bats would ever have been able to make up.

Henshaw came in from the bullpen, and Sproul, Burdett, and McCoy stood around as the pitching ace of the Gazelles took his warm-ups. As the confab broke up, Johnny walked a few steps back toward that position with his third baseman.

"You're playin' pretty deep, Trigger," the manager suggested mildly.

"Look, Skipper," McCoy came back with considerable vehemence. "I gotta play this my own way! It's the only way I *can* play it!"

The manager saw that McCoy was still filled with an inner rage. He nodded his head and patted the other man on the shoulder.

"Play it *your* way, Trigger. That's all I want!"

Henshaw got the second out on a pop-up, but a clean single got the first run of the game home; a strike-out closed the inning—but one run looked big with only six outs left to the home side.

It was one, two, three in the lower half of the eighth, and the Gazelles trotted disconsolately out to their positions. Henshaw had steam up now. The first Maroon flied deep. The second was caught looking as a third strike blazed by. Then a twisting, infield pop-up was hit to the left side. The ball sailed up high beyond the rim of the stadium and then started its deceptive fall.

McCoy—formerly a deadly snatcher of these pops—planted himself underneath and then began to drift. Sproul, and the shortstop coming over to back up the play, saw at one and the same time that the Trigger had misjudged the ball badly. They both hollered. At the last minute, McCoy sprinted over into foul territory and dove over the retaining wall into the boxes, stabbing out with his glove and getting the ball.

THE catch was a good one but the fact that he had misjudged it by so wide a margin was bad. McCoy was slow coming off the field into the dugout. His face was old beyond its thirty-three years. He'd brought his glove in with him, and Sproul wondered if that meant he was taking himself out of the game.

McCoy fired the fielder's mitt viciously into the corner of the dugout. Sproul, the closest to the third baseman as he came down the steps, saw with shock that there were tears in the man's eyes—tears of anger or sadness, he did not know, but anyway McCoy was ranting.

"Listen, you guys!" the Trigger appealed to his teammates. "We been playin' like a bunch of bums!"

The faces around his hardened unreceptively.

"I mean that!" the Trigger went on, "and of all of us, I'm the worst right now, but hell, I know it and I wanna win this ball game! See, fellas, it looks like my last one! Isn't there anyone on this club 'cept me that wants ta win one?"

The other players shuffled uneasily and tried not to look at McCoy. Sproul thought to himself, this is the first time they've thought about being anything but mechanical ball players for a month!

"I'm fourth up in this inning," McCoy went on. "That means wunna you guys gotta get on or I don't get up. And I wanna get up! Any guy gets on there . . . I'll move 'im! When it's *your* last game . . . any of you . . . *you'll* hope somebody does for you what I want you to do for me! Let's win it, gang!"

Sproul wondered. The first Gazelle up hit a screamer over second, but the shortstop had been moved into the right place and took the ball with a leap.

McCoy pounded his fist into his hand.

"Isn't anybody on this club kin getta hit . . . get on base?"

The second Gazelle was a strike-out, but at least he was swinging hard on each one, and when he came back, he slammed his bat down. Sproul noticed and was glad.

McCoy was raging. Burdett was the next man up, and the third baseman put his hands on the big first-sacker's shoulders.

"Burdie! Getta life out there!"

Burdett went up, split the first two balls. With one-and-one on him, he fouled the third pitch into the stands. McCoy held his

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

head. The Maroon pitcher, working carefully now, wasted two, and with the full count, lost the batter with a curve that didn't come around.

EVEN before the final pitch, McCoy was on his feet selecting his bat, rubbing dirt on his hands. If Sproul had wanted to instruct him, he was gone to the plate before the Mgr. could say anything.

Knowing what he came to know later, Sproul figured afterward that it would have to have gone this way—on the first pitch the way it did. Otherwise, the Trigger would have had to play it cautious, hunching and trying to make up in savvy and baseball experience what he lacked in other ways. But this Maroon out there had a steam ball that he'd been pouring on all afternoon with the first pitch and Trigger tok a toe-hold and put every ounce of his 165 pounds into that first swing.

The ball, as it left the bat explosively, had very little height, and for that reason, looked to be a deep out to one of the fielders. But it screamed on a line and carried into the bleachers. It meant a two-one ball game for the Gazelles, and for the first time in weeks, the boys whooped it up in the dressing-room. They were back in a sixth-place tie after a thrilling win.

But when the manager looked around, McCoy had gone.

The next day the Trigger arrived in the dressing-room with most of the anger gone out of his face. He went straight into the manager's office. Sproul was waiting for him. The two men sat as though thinking out their words for a moment, and then McCoy put it matter-of-factly.

"Well, Johnny. you and everybody else have seen the story, but I guess you know why I did it. You see, Johnny, baseball's everything to me. It's my whole life! I don't know anything else! Along with Juney, it's the only thing that means a lot to me so I guess I tried to—"

His voice trailed off.

Trigger cleared his throat, after a moment continued.

"How did the boys take it, Johnny? I hope they don't think I let them down by not telling. What do they think of the story?"

"What story, Trigger?" Sproul replied quietly.

The third baseman wrinkled his forehead.

"Why the dope about me! Joey Orchard's story. I can't deny it, Johnny. It's true!"

"There's been no story," the Mgr. said.

McCoy was on his feet now.

"No story! But he *knows!* He spotted me yesterday, found out the whole thing—and I guess you know I . . . I took a punch at him. He was gonna spill it all in last night's paper!"

"There's been no story, Trigger," Sproul persisted. "Just you and me know this."

"*And* Joey Orchard!" the third baseman added.

McCoy thought that over and then he seemed to catch on fast. He'd looked relieved. Now the bitter smile came back.

"You worked somethin' for me, Johnny . . . I know that. That's your kinda guy. How long have I got before Orchard springs it? Today?"

"We got the weekend, kid," admitted Sproul, quietly.

"Four games," mused McCoy. "Four games with the Bullies. Three wins will put us at the top of the second division. Four . . . well . . ." his mouth twisted sardonically into that little smile. "Four and you could bring 'em home in fifth without me from here on in! I wanna win those games, Johnny!"

"So do I!" said the manager. "For the team and for you!"

Sproul spotted McCoy in the lineup strategically. In the first game he used the Trigger as a pinch-runner, and the guy tore like a crazy fool from first to home on a long single with the run that was the tie-breaker and winner for the Gazelles.

In the second game Gazelle bats outslammed the Bullies, and McCoy, playing in the field for the last three innings, contributed an important out when he stopped a bullet line drive with his chest again and threw the Bully tearing down to first out with a magnificent snap pitch from the deep third-base sack.

IT WAS the first double-header the Gazelles had won since June. There was only one unpleasant incident to mar an other-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wise good day for Sproul. When he was leaving the field late that Sunday evening, he ran into Joey Orchard on the street outside.—Orchard, wth a bruise under his eye and the ugly sneer.

"Just wait till you see tomorrow evening's paper!" the sports columnist threatened. "I'm going to show that worthless punk up! He's been lucky, Sproul, and *you've* been lucky! That homer yesterday and some of his play today! He'll be out of major-league baseball, and it won't help *you* any, Mister Manager, that you've carried him along so far.

"Do your damndest, Orchard!" Sproul snapped. "Just remember we've got tomorrow!"

"You'll lose 'em both!" was Orchard's parting shot. "Tomorrow the Bullies'll throw some pitching at you!"

Labor Day Monday rolled around, and for the first game at least, the Bully front-line pitching didn't pay off. The Gazelles had spirit now and hustle. The boys were driving and feeling their oats. It was nice to win. They hadn't known the experience consistently for months. It was a question of outhustling the potentially more powerful Bullies.

They took it four-three, and Sproul couldn't resist a look up at the press box between games. There was an edge of worry in him, though, too. By now, he knew, Orchard had filed his story with the evening paper and syndicate that carried his baseball stuff from coast to coast to millions of readers. Sproul could almost imagine that story and the way Orchard would write it. It would make Sproul look like a bad manager—a manager derelict to his club and his owners—and even worse, it would put McCoy in a very bad light.

Resolutely, the manager shook this worry out of his head. The big thing now was to win this one. It would mean a four-game sweep of the series, and with this impetus—if it could be gained—he knew somehow the Gazelles would carry on the rest of the way through September and finish at least as high as fifth, and top of the second division.

With his team on the bench waiting for the cry to play ball, Sproul looked down the line and sought out McCoy's face. He'd noticed first in the dressing-room that that face was strained now beyond the breaking point. The man was under a tremendous burden. You can't go on carrying those things. They undermined your health and they undermined your spirit. Trigger had gone down the line on this, as Sproul well knew now, for a long, long time. It was a terrible thing to hide from your teammates, your friends, and even your wife, and this was—any way you looked at it—McCoy's last ball game.

Trigger had said that two days ago, but it was true today. When those fifteen million fans began to read the Orchard column, that would be all.

Sproul had decided on his lineup. When it was announced, McCoy came over. His voice was low and gruff with strain.

"I can play, Skipper. Put me in there and I'll go for as long as I can. I'm all right," but the black circles under his eyes belied it.

The manager shook his head.

"I want to save you for spots, Trigger. You've done great that way the last few days!"

But maybe the spot wouldn't come. Prepat, the Bully fire-baller, was on the hill for them. Prepat had the smokiest fast ball in the big leagues. The sports writers likened him to Walter Johnson, the Big Train. He was the guy who broke all tests on that speedball detector equipment that measures the traveling rate of a thrown spheroid.

Prepat was hot—and today particularly so, for the Bullies had to have this one. Henshaw looked slow in comparison, but he had experience and an assortment of stuff that popped and broke and shimmied over the plate.

But the Gazelles couldn't touch Prepat, and the Bullies nicked away at Henshaw as the game went down the line. They filled the bases twice, and at last, squeezed a man home. When the Gazelles' substitute third baseman couldn't get the handle on a ball shunted right at him, the utility hot-corner guardian was obviously rattled.

McCoy pointedly walked up and down in front of the manager several times, pleading with his eyes, but Sproul stayed silent, his chin cupped by his hand. In the bottom

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

High School Course at Home — Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H.S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. HB-39, Drexel at 58th Chicago 37

DRUNK?

DOCTOR'S MARVELOUS NEW DISCOVERY RELIEVES DRUNKENNESS IN 5 DAYS

Does Drunkenness Threaten Your Happiness or Your Loved Ones? Our Remarkable New Discovery Quickly and Easily Helps Bring Relief From All Desire For Liquor! With This Craving For Liquor Gone, No Will Power Is Necessary To Stop Drinking! This Is Strictly A Home Method! Easy to Take! Nothing Like It Before! You Can Go to Business And Carry On Your Social Life As Usual, While Using Our Method! May be used secretly for whiskey, wine or beer! Improvement Is Noticed In A Remarkably Short Time! The Price Is Amazingly Low! Only $10.00 For The Entire Method, Formula and Instructions! This Is The Only Method That Guarantees Satisfaction or Your Money Refunded! You Will Bless The Day You Saw This As Thousands Have Already Done!

SEND NO MONEY

Pay Postman On Delivery! Mail Us Your Name and Address Only!

SCIENTIFIC AIDS CO., INC. Dept. 19 Box 118, Jersey City 3, N.J.

PILES!

NEW! NEW! NEW!

AMAZINGLY FAST PALLIATIVE RELIEF! AN AMAZINGLY NEW FORMULA THAT IS GUARANTEED TO BRING FAST PALLIATIVE RELIEF OR YOUR MONEY IS QUICKLY REFUNDED! NO GREASY OINTMENTS! NO MESS OR STICKY FINGERS! NO SUPPOSITORIES! IT'S BETTER— FASTER—EASIER TO USE! RELIEF NOTICED ALMOST ON CONTACT! THROW AWAY THOSE OLD FASHIONED, MESSY, GREASY OINTMENTS!

SEND NO MONEY

MAIL YOUR ORDER TODAY TO US! PAY POSTMAN ONLY $3. PLUS POSTAGE ON DELIVERY OF THIS MARVELOUS PRODUCT! IT'S GUARANTEED! YOU'LL BLESS THE DAY YOU MAILED YOUR ORDER!

SCIENCE ASSOCIATES, DEPT. 14 BOX 118, JERSEY CITY 3, N. J.

GETTING BALD?

Doctor's Amazing Discovery for Hair and Scalp! Why spend hundreds of dollars and time visiting fancy offices for treatment? This discovery may be used in the privacy of your home—in a few minutes—only once each week—made from a specialist's prescription, it has been highly successful in stopping further loss of hair due to the most common cause—seborrheic dermatitis and associated dandruff! We do not claim infallibility. Guaranteed refund if you are not delighted with a healthier head of hair! Mail your name and address only! When this remarkable formula preparation with easy to follow instructions is delivered to you pay postman only $10 plus postage! This product is medically tested and proven! It is guaranteed to delight and surprise you! Baldness won't wait! Order now! Mail Orders to Dept. 32 NATIONAL SCALP RESEARCH, Box 186, Jersey City 3, N. J.

SEND NO MONEY

ILLUSTRATED CARTOON BOOKLETS!

Say, fellows, be the life of the party with these small illustrated cartoon booklets of comic characters. Ten assorted, $1.00. You'll want more. No Postal COD's.

REGINALD SALES

1216-P Park Row Bldg., New York 7, N. Y.

of the ninth—just like it says in the scripts—the Gazelles began to do business. Prepat was never faster, and none of the batters dared to take a toe-hold. He had them ducking and dipping and fading away from the plate because that ball came in like cannon shot and it would tear your head off if it ever hit you squarely.

But the game of baseball is like this: A bat gets thrust out even as the batter backs away from the plate to get out of the way of a pitch. The ball Texas-leagues into center, and there's a man on first. Somebody else messes up a double-play, and there's a Gazelle on first and second.

Prepat got hot and threw just seven balls for two strike-outs, but another Bully infield error filled the bases with two away. Sproul didn't need to look to left or right; McCoy was standing right in front of him.

It was Henshaw's turn to hit, but the Gazelles would put in a pinch for him. Sproul cleared his throat of the emotion that clung there and said,

"Okay, Trigger, she's yours!"

WILY baseball man that he was, the Skipper knew Trigger could never duplicate his feat of two days ago. That was one of those one-in-a-thousand shots, a "blind" spot, you might say. But it was the kid's last game. That was surely written in the book and in the Orchard story that even now was coming off the presses all over the country. And whether it worked or not, it would be a good way to go out—to go up there in the clutch and to do his best. At least Sproul knew that's how he'd feel about it, and McCoy was his kind of ball player.

Trigger went up, his shoulders slouched a little from tension and fatigue, trailing his bat. Prepat stood on the mound, a tall, very alone figure, slim-legged, with massive shoulders and long arms. He had the sardonic smile of a man who knows he's good—of a man who knows he's got a ball game in his pocket, with just one guy—a former great, if you will, but no ball of fire—in there to stop him.

What were you hitting, Trigger McCoy, as you went up there to bat? .217? Shame on you, McCoy!

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But a guy up there with a bat is dangerous, and even if there were two outs with the Bullies on top one-nothing, the bases were full.

Prepat never worked more carefully. His whole system of pitching was Scare 'em with your first one. Drive 'em back with it and then split the plate!

The long arms twirled and the ball came in, hissing with its speed. McCoy unlocked his wrists and then stepped away, but the ball hit the corner of the plate. Prepat, on the mound, smiled as he took his catcher's return throw.

McCoy went to the rosin bag and then tossed it away. Sproul, in the dugout, shook a fist at him and then wondered if he'd seen. McCoy was back in to take a screaming outcurve that went for a ball. A strike bored the plate, and still the Trigger hadn't taken the bat off his shoulders.

The three Gazelles led cautiously down off the sacks, cautiously because Prepat's pitching was so swift that they had no time to take a lead on him. Two strikes and one ball, and Prepat would waste one. This was the scare ball, thrown in close to you, making you hop away to save your life.

Prepat, still sneering, shook his arm, hitched, whirled into his pitching motion and fired. The ball came—a streak of white in the deepening shadows of the late afternoon. It was close and inside. And then so suddenly—because there wasn't time with the speed of the pitch—people realized that the ball had not gone on through to the catcher nor had it been hit away from the plate.

The speed of the pitch became a trickling white thing bobbing away from McCoy, and the Trigger was sinking to the ground, his hands against his sde—and only afterward people remembered they'd heard the sickening thud as the ball smashed itself into the batter's ribs.

He got up finally and went down to first base, and the applause grew and grew. That forced in the tieing run, and it was anticlimatic that in the tenth the Gazelles won as Burdett homered.

THAT night Orchard's story broke everywhere, and people discussed it with avid

INVENTORS

Patent laws encourage the development of inventions. Our firm is registered to practice before the U. S. Patent Office. Write for further particulars as to patent protection and procedure and "Invention Record" form at once. No obligation.

McMORROW, BERMAN & DAVIDSON
Registered Patent Attorneys
1292 Victor Building Washington 1, D. C.

RUPTURED?

Get Relief This Proven Way

Why try to worry along with trusses that gouge your flesh—press heavily on hips and spine—enlarge opening—fail to hold rupture? You need the Cluthe. No leg-straps or cutting belts. Automatic adjustable pad holds at real opening—follows every body movement with instant increased support in case of strain. Cannot slip whether at work or play. Light. Waterproof, can be worn in bath. Send for amazing FREE book, "Advice To Ruptured," and details of liberal truthful 60-day trial offer. Also endorsements from grateful users in your neighborhood. Write:

Cluthe Sons, Dept. 39, Bloomfield, New Jersey

LEARN HOW TO HYPNOTIZE

Amazing self-study lessons . . . in simple, easy to understand language. How to select a subject—how to hypnotize by telephone—how to make money from hypnotism—mental telepathy—stage hypnotism—self-hypnosis: how modern hypnotism is used to *conquer inferiority complex*, fear, battle fatigue, timidity, etc. Clear helpful pictures show operating positions, movements. Money-back guarantee. Only $1.95, postpaid — or COD, plus postage. Write today!

Nelson-Hall Co., 1139 S. Wabash Ave., Dept. G-23, Chicago 5, Ill.

RHEUMATISM

ARTHRITIS-NEURITIS-SCIATICA

If you suffer the agonizing pains of these diseases when the usual remedies have failed, learn about a new trustworthy, modern, non-surgical treatment method. This marvelous treatment is completely explained in the Ball Clinic's FREE Book. Write today. No obligation.

BALL CLINIC Dept. 66 Excelsior Springs, Mo.

DRUNK?

Jeopardizing HAPPINESS, HEALTH, and INCOME? Relief may be obtained economically and quickly with U.M.R. ORIGINAL HOME METHOD. MAY BE USED SECRETLY! Formula used by leading alcoholic institutions to help BUILD AVERSION AND ELIMINATE DESIRE FOR ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES, now available to you. Has helped bring relief to many drinkers as a method of temporary ALCOHOL WITHDRAWAL; and by BREAKING DRINKING CYCLE. Not a remedy for underlying personality maladjustment causing alcoholic excesses. NO BOOKS! DOES NOT FOR ANY PROLONGED PERIOD, INTERFERE WITH WORK OR SOCIAL LIFE. One of many satisfied users writes: "Your method is wonderful! Am very happy over it!"—Mrs M.D.S., Ill. Prepared by pharmacist formerly connected with leading alcoholic sanatariums. Comes in plain wrapper, READY TO USE, complete with instructions. ACCEPT NO SUBSTITUTES.

FREE! with order: generous supply special formula capsules to help tone up nervous and digestive system.

SEND NO MONEY! Now Only $4.50 ACT TODAY!

USE 15 DAYS AT OUR RISK—SATISFACTION GUARANTEED OR RETURN UNUSED PORTIONS AND $4.50 REFUNDED.

Send name and address, pay postman $4.50 plus postage! Send $4.50 with order and we pay postage.

UNITED MEDICAL RESEARCH
BOX 428, DEPT. U-7, MINNEAPOLIS 1, MINN.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CARBURETOR TOO RICH
MAKES MOTORIST TOO POOR

Car owners who are wasting money and not getting proper gas mileage due to over-rich mixtures will be pleased to learn how to save gasoline by VACU-MATING over-rich mixtures. VACU-MATIC fits all cars, trucks and tractors. It is *automatic* and operates on the supercharge principle. Easily installed in a few minutes.

SALESMEN WANTED! Big Profits! Send name, address on penny postcard for *free particulars* and how to get yours for introducing.

VACU-MATIC CO., 7617-1522 W. State St., WAUWATOSA, WIS.

DRUNKENNESS

DO YOU WANT RELIEF? Drunkenness ruins Health, Happiness. BREAK THE DRINKING CYCLE QUICKLY. Use ALCOREM, the amazing liquid that intends to promote aversion (dislike) toward ALL intoxicating drinks. Not classed as a permanent "cure," but it IS a recognized method of withdrawal of alcohol. Interrupts drinking cycle and causes many to turn from liquor. May be taken in SECRET. A few drops of this wonderful ALCOREM eliminates desire for more alcohol. GUARANTEED Pure and Effective. Aversion treatment is recognized by Medical Authority. ALCOREM comes ready to use—simple instructions included—NO BOOKS TO READ—need not cause excessive time out from work or social duties. One happy ALCOREM user writes: "PLEASE SEND ME MORE WONDERFUL ALCOREM AT ONCE FOR A FRIEND WHO IS A HEAVY DRINKER. I BOUGHT FROM YOU BEFORE AND HAD WONDERFUL RESULTS." As an additional help we send . . .

FREE! 21 PINKIES with order of ALCOREM Special Formula capsules to help nervous and digestive system also, FREE WEIGHT CHART. Acts as guide in building reformed drinker to proper weight.

SEND NO MONEY—ORDER NOW

SATISFACTION OR MONEY BACK. Send name and address. We rush ALCOREM, FREE PINKIES and FREE Weight Chart. Mailed in plain wrapper. Pay postman only $4.95 and small C.O.D. charge. TO SAVE C.O.D. CHARGE SEND $4.95 WITH ORDER.

MIDWEST HEALTH AIDS • DEPT. P-1
603 SO. DEARBORN STREET • CHICAGO 5, ILL.

DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men.

35 Years in Business
300,000 Satisfied Customers

FREE BOOK

THE NEWELL COMPANY
600 Clayton Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.

"THEY WIN—YOU LOSE"

You Go Broke Betting They Do Pass,
You Go Broke Betting They Don't Pass,
Send me a STAMPED Self Addressed Envelope, and I will tell you things about DICE you never knew.
Have gold in your pocket, when there's silver in your hair.

J. F. STEWART
Box 526, Houston, Texas

OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD!
TRAIN FOR A FUTURE IN
DIESEL

Prepare for the big earning power of Diesel Trained Men. Start learning at home, in spare time. UEI's easy, practical training covers all phases of DIESEL engine operation, fuel systems, auxiliary equipment, repairs and maintenance. When home course is completed, you come to Chicago for actual shop practice on DIESEL MOTORS under expert instructors, at UEI's fine, modern school.

BEGIN AT ONCE—GET ALL THE FACTS FREE. WRITE TODAY!

DIESEL DIVISION UTILITIES ENGINEERING INSTITUTE
2521 Sheffield Avenue • Dept. DE-2 • Chicago 14, Illinois

interest—this man whose war injury of a piece of shrapnel in his head had not been over and done with when the surgeons had fished the piece out, but had gone on later and tragically to affect the sight of his left eye. This, to a baseball man, was a kind of death, and McCoy, unwilling to give up, had spent his time going secretly from doctor to doctor.

Orchard meant it as a "villain" piece—a guy letting down his team and his teammates, keeping the truth even from his manager and his wife; but it made of Trigger McCoy a national hero.

While people everywhere were catching up on this big baseball expose, Trigger was in the hospital with two cracked ribs and a coterie of anxious attendants. Juney, with the tears still rimming her eyes, was sitting by his bed, with Johnny Sproul on the other side and the Brady brothers fussing at the foot. Some of his teammates took turns peering through the door to the intense annoyance of the hospital staff.

You see, everybody knew, who'd been at the ball park that day, that Trigger had made no attempt to get out of the way of that pitch and that even if the guy's eyesight was bad, every twelve-year-old kid who shimmies in over the center-field fence for free, knows that big Prepat always wastes one to scare the batter when he's ahead.

But it meant that much to Trigger McCoy to win a ball game, and with June getting moist-eyed again and the Brady brothers to wag their heads like crazy in collaboration, Johnny Sproul put his hand on McCoy's shoulder and said:

"Trigger, any guy loves baseball the way you do has got to stay in the game. As long as I'm around and as long as the Gazelles are around, you're going to have a job with us . . . a *good* job! You're a credit to baseball!"

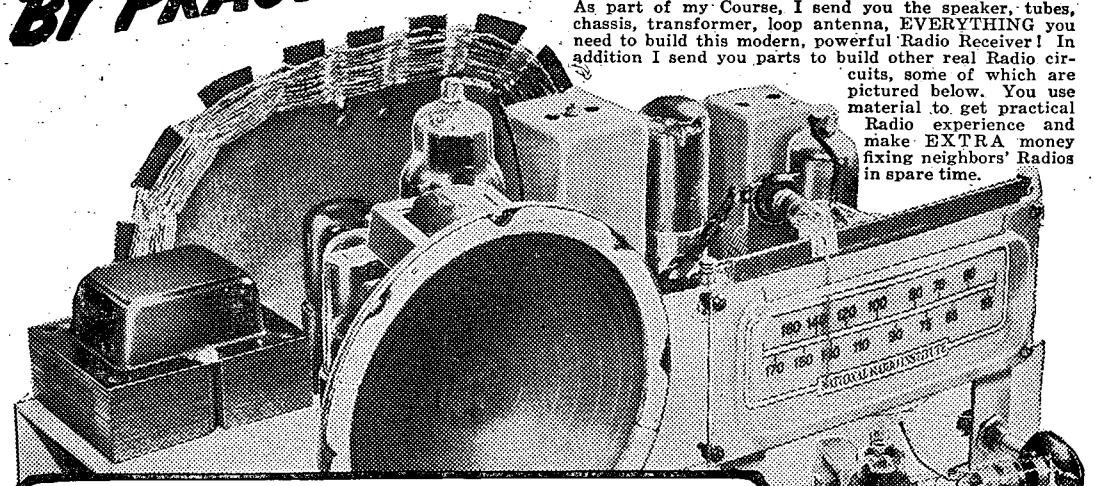
Which was enough cheer for any guy on a hospital vacation. Then you have to add something else. It seems that a few days later Joey Orchard, himself, in person, came around and said just about the same thing.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LEARN RADIO

BY PRACTICING IN SPARE TIME

As part of my Course, I send you the speaker, tubes, chassis, transformer, loop antenna, EVERYTHING you need to build this modern, powerful Radio Receiver! In addition I send you parts to build other real Radio circuits, some of which are pictured below. You use material to get practical Radio experience and make EXTRA money fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time.



I SEND YOU BIG KITS OF PARTS

You Build and Experiment With this MODERN RADIO

AND MANY OTHER CIRCUITS

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute

Want a good-pay job in the fast-growing RADIO-TELEVISION Industry? Want a money-making Radio-Television shop of your own? I've trained hundreds of men to be Radio Technicians . . . men with no previous experience. My tested and proved train-at-home method makes learning easy. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. Get practical experience with MANY KITS OF PARTS I send. All equipment yours to keep.

Make EXTRA MONEY In Spare Time

The day you enroll, I start sending SPECIAL BOOKLETS that show you how to make EXTRA MONEY fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time. From here it's a short step to your own shop, or a good-pay Radio-Television servicing job. Or get into Police, Aviation, Marine Radio, Broadcasting, etc. Think of opportunities in the booming Television Industry.

See What N. R. I. Can Do For You

Act now! Mail coupon for lesson and 64-page book, "HOW TO BE A SUCCESS IN RADIO AND TELEVISION—ELECTRONICS." Tells how quickly, easily you can get started. Send coupon in envelope or paste on penny postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9GM, National Radio Institute, Pioneer Home Study Radio School, Washington 9, D. C.

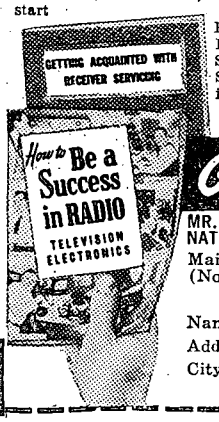
I TRAINED THESE MEN

"AM NOW GETTING $60 a week and overtime as Radio Serviceman for The Adams Appliance Co."—W. A. ANGEL, Blythesville, Arkansas.

"KNEW NOTHING ABOUT RADIO when I enrolled. Now am doing spare time work. I have more than paid for my Course and about $200 worth of equipment."—RAYMOND HOLTCAMP, Vandalia, Ill.

VETERANS

You can get this training without cost under G. I. Bill



MY COURSE INCLUDES TELEVISION

Good for Both—FREE

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9GM
NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE, Washington 9, D. C.

Mail me FREE Sample Lesson and 64-page book. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Age_____

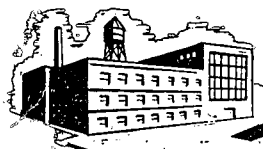
Name_____

Address_____

City_____ Zone_____ State_____

☐ Check if Veteran

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



BUY DIRECT AND SAVE!

FACTORY TO YOU at WAY BELOW RETAIL

Get GAYLARK DeLuxe

SEAT COVERS

ACTUALLY THE VERY SAME MATERIAL USED IN COVERS SELLING UP TO $25!

You've never seen seat covers like these before—NOW offered to you at tremendous savings. Cheerful patterns that brighten up your car—cover up worn upholstery—protect new upholstery. GAYLARK'S new Seat Covers are TOPS in quality, smart styling, and value. Stunning new *Uniblend* plaids compliment your car interior. Just the handsome touch YOUR car needs!

Every GAYLARK Seat Cover is designed for maximum service, with double stitched seams for greater strength. Easy to install too! On-in-a-jiffy with elasticized slip-over sides that give a snug, smooth fit. Here's VALUE for you! So buy direct from GAYLARK—and YOU pocket the difference.

$3.98 for 3-passenger solid back coupe, or rear seat of coach or sedan.

FRONT SEAT COVER $4.98

$8.95 complete set of covers for sedan or coach.

CHECK THESE IMPORTANT ADVANTAGES

- Sturdy Construction
- Up-to-the-minute Styling
- Full Protection for Front and Rear of Seat
- Washable Plastic Coated Fibre
- Colorful "Uniblend" Plaids
- Double Stitching Throughout
- Trimmed with Richly Grained Leatherette
- Perfect, Glove-like Fit
- Genuine DuPont Coloring
- Money Saving

WE HAVE COVERS TO FIT EVERY POPULAR MAKE OF CAR—NEW OR OLD MODELS

EASY TO INSTALL—
on all types and makes of cars!

Be sure to specify which type covers you wish when you order. Note styles illustrated below:

1. Solid back for 4-door sedan—front or rear. Rear for coach or coupe.
2. Divided back, solid seat for front coupe or coach.
3. Individual seats or bucket type for divided back and seat.

GAYLARK PRODUCTS 615 N. Aberdeen, Chicago 22, Ill.

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE Like thousands of others, you will be completely satisfied with GAYLARK Seat Covers. If not—your money will be cheerfully refunded, at once.

SEND NO MONEY

GAYLARK PRODUCTS, Dept. A-6
615 N. Aberdeen, Chicago 22, Ill.

Gentlemen: Rush Gaylark Seat Covers on 5-day money-back guarantee

- ☐ Complete front and back covers $8.95 ☐ Front seat cover only $4.98
- ☐ 3-pass. divided back coupe $4.98 My car is a 19..... Make.....
- ☐ 3-pass. solid back coupe or rear seat of coach or sedan $3.98
- ☐ Type 1 ☐ Type 2 ☐ Type 3 ☐ 2-door ☐ 4-door
- ☐ Rush postpaid—$.....enclosed. ☐ Send C.O.D. plus postage.

Name.....
(please print)

Address.....

City.....Zone.....State.....

- ☐ Please include one pair Fibre Door Protectors to match, at $1.00 per set
- ☐ Wedge cushion to match, $1.00

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED